

THE APPROPRIATION OF TRADITIONAL MUSICAL PRACTICES IN MODERN  
YORUBA DRAMA: A CASE STUDY OF WOLE SOYINKA'S *DEATH AND THE KING'S  
HORSEMAN*

by

Oyebade Ajibola Dosunmu

BA, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, 2001

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This Thesis was presented

by

Oyebade Ajibola Dosunmu

It was defended on

April 6, 2005

and approved by

Dr. Joseph K. Adjaye, PhD, Professor of Africana Studies

Dr. Mary Lewis, PhD, Professor of Music

Dr. Nathan Davis, PhD, Professor of Music

Dr. Akin Euba, PhD, Professor of Music  
Thesis Advisor

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While the earliest forms of Yoruba theater may very well be found in ritual plays such as *egungun* and *adamu orisa*, over time, noteworthy genres such as *alarinjo* popular theater, folk opera, and modern literary drama have developed. In a postcolonial society like Nigeria where Western culture has exerted considerable influence, there is ample room for speculation over the extent of European dramatic conventions in modern Yoruba drama. However, regarding the music which so characteristically features in such plays, there is no question about its traditional source. Moreover, modern Yoruba drama evidently draws on a broad cultural spectrum which includes myth, ritual, religion, custom and history, all constituents of a rich oral repository. In my thesis, I examine to what extent the appropriation of traditional musical practices in modern Yoruba drama reflects a cultural self-apprehension in the approach of the dramatist. As a case study, I investigate Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* as a modern development of Yoruba theatrical traditions.

Soyinka's plays have been praised for their skilled combination of African dramatic traditions and themes with Western structural elements. In *Death and the King's Horseman* the elements of music, dance, and miming which characterize traditional theatrical forms such as *alarinjo*, the traditional traveling theater of the Yoruba, are copiously used to enhance the

dramatic scheme of the play. Further, the play which was published in 1975 is Soyinka's adaptation of a historical encounter which took place in 1945 in the Yoruba city of Oyo. When *Elesin*, commander of the King's stables, tried to commit ritual suicide in fulfillment of cultural expectations following the death of the King, the colonial *authorities* intervened, marring a ritual process which had important cosmological implications for the people of Oyo. In my thesis, I attempt to contextualize the events portrayed in *Horseman* within a historical setting relevant for the understanding of the events it portrays. Ultimately, I make comparisons between the techniques of dramatic development in traditional forms such as *alarinjo* and similar techniques evident in Soyinka's play.

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## 1. CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. STATEMENT OF RESEARCH

The innate theatricality of the musical practices of the Yoruba of Nigeria, and indeed many African cultures, has been asserted by several scholars.<sup>1</sup> However, the musicality of modern Yoruba drama, while apparent, has been touched on only marginally. My study attempts a musicological discourse of modern drama in a Yoruba setting.

While the earliest forms of Yoruba theater may very well be found in ritual plays such as *egungun* and *adamu orisa*, over time, noteworthy genres such as *alarinjo* (traditional traveling theater),<sup>2</sup> popular theater, folk opera, and modern literary drama have developed. In a postcolonial society like Nigeria where Western culture has exerted considerable influence, there is ample room for speculation over the extent of European dramatic conventions in modern Yoruba drama. However, regarding the music which so characteristically features in such plays, there is no question about its traditional source. Moreover, modern Yoruba drama evidently draws on a broad cultural spectrum which includes myth, ritual, religion, custom and history, all constituents of a rich oral repository. In my thesis, I examine to what extent the appropriation of traditional musical practices in modern Yoruba drama reflects a cultural self-apprehension in the

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<sup>1</sup> Akin Euba, "Music and Masks: The Use of Music in the African Masquerade Theater," in *Essays on Music in Africa*, Vol. 1 (Lagos: Elekoto Music Center, 1988), 58, Joel Adedeji, "Traditional Yoruba Theatre," *African Arts* 3/1 (Autumn 1969): 60 – 63, Meki Nzewi, "Music, Dance, Drama and the Stage in Nigeria," in *Drama and Theater in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*, ed. Yemi Ogunbiyi (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981), 433 – 461.

<sup>2</sup> Under this genre are forms such as *Oje*, *Apidan* and *Agbegijo*.

approach of the dramatist. As a case study, I investigate Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* as a modern development of Yoruba theatrical traditions.

Wole Soyinka is Africa's leading playwright and most prominent literary figure. Born 13 July 1934 near Abeokuta, Western Nigeria, Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka received his early education in Nigeria. He later attended University of Leeds between 1954 and 1957 where he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. Since producing his first play *The Swamp Dwellers* at the Students' Drama Festival in London in 1958, Soyinka has authored more than thirty works covering multiple genres including autobiography, literary criticism, political essays, poetry, drama and the novel. He is most recognized for his creative writing, however, and in 1986 became the first African to win the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Soyinka's plays have been praised for their skilled combination of African dramatic traditions and themes with Western structural elements. In *Death and the King's Horseman* the elements of music, dance, and miming which characterize traditional theatrical forms such as *alarinjo*, the traditional traveling theater of the Yoruba, are copiously used to enhance the dramatic scheme of the play. Further, the play which was published in 1975 is Soyinka's adaptation of a historical encounter which took place in 1945 in the Yoruba city of Oyo. When *Elesin*, commander of the King's stables, tried to commit ritual suicide in fulfillment of cultural expectations following the death of the *Alaafin*<sup>3</sup> of Oyo, the colonial *authorities* intervened, marring a ritual process which had important cosmological implications for the people of Oyo.<sup>4</sup> In my thesis, I attempt to contextualize the events portrayed in *Horseman* within a historical setting relevant for the understanding of the events it portrays. Ultimately, I make comparisons

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<sup>3</sup> King of Oyo

<sup>4</sup> See Chapter three for a concise synopsis of the play as well as a brief historical account of the events portrayed in *Horseman*.

between the techniques of dramatic development in traditional forms such as *alarinjo* and similar techniques evident in Soyinka's play.

In chapters one and two, I present an account of the Yoruba people, their language, cosmology, musico-dramatic practices and a historical account of the development of the theatrical genres of the Yoruba. These two chapters serve mainly to provide a cultural and historical basis for the analysis which I undertake in chapter three. In chapter four, I summarize the main points highlighted throughout the thesis and draw final conclusions.

## **1.2. STATE OF RESEARCH**

Scholarly research on Yoruba theater has been characterized by trends which reflect the attitudes of writers during the course of the history and development of its constituent forms.<sup>5</sup> These trends, situated within prevailing socio-political discourses at different points in the development of European scholarship, were arbitrated, at first, by the polarization of Western and the African cultures. The former was seen as civilized and therefore valid, and the latter as uncivilized and therefore inconsequential. Subsequent research by both Nigerian and Western scholars challenges this notion, resulting in the revision of misconceptions which once prevailed.

The earliest written records on Yoruba theater are contained in the journals and narratives of explorers and merchants who started arriving on the West African coast as early as the fifteenth century. These early accounts were primarily cursory, the events they described being merely scenes of music making situated within panoramic views of African life as seen through

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<sup>5</sup> These forms range from traditional ritual plays to modern literary plays, and from folk opera to literary operatic forms.

European eyes. Prominent among these are the accounts of Hugh Clapperton<sup>6</sup> and Richard Lander<sup>7</sup> who in 1826 witnessed a play which has come to be identified by Joel Adedeji as an example of *Alarinjo*, the traditional traveling theater of the Yoruba.<sup>8</sup>

With the rise of missionary activity and colonization,<sup>9</sup> twin catalysts of radical socio-political transformations in Africa, research on African culture in general began to take on a more systematic approach. In the nineteenth century, European accounts of African cultures quickly shifted from being descriptive records of the specific to a generalized discourse, and in the process lost something of the critical valuation which the earlier individualized narratives might have engendered. Much of nineteenth-century (and a large bulk of early twentieth century) ethnological research reflected the prevailing evolutionist theory of the period which, while subjecting African arts to ethnocentric ideas of aesthetic value<sup>10</sup> sought to reconstruct a Western past from a non-Western present. According to Kacke Gotrick, “The aim of early research was to reconstruct the “original” theater, to shed light on past stages of our own [European] theater, and even on past stages of our entire cultural development ...”<sup>11</sup> Such is the nature of the discourse presented in Loomis Havemeyer’s book, *The Drama of Savage Peoples*, published in 1916.

In 1954, Ulli Beier, a German researcher and teacher at the University College Ibadan who worked extensively among the Yoruba for many years published an article, “Yoruba Folk Operas,” in the first volume of the journal, *African Music*. Although brief and largely descriptive, Beier’s article departs from mainstream anthropological discourse of the period which, in

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<sup>6</sup> Hugh Clapperton, *Journal of a Second Expedition into the Interior of Africa* (London, 1829), 53-56.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Lander, *Records of Captain Clapperton’s Last Expedition to Africa*, Vol. 1 (London, 1830), 115 – 121.

<sup>8</sup> Joel Adedeji, “‘Alarinjo’: The Traditional Yoruba Travelling Theatre,” in *Drama and Theater in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*, ed. Yemi Ogunbiyi (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981).

<sup>9</sup> Missionary activities began in Yoruba land in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>10</sup> Writing in 1961, Herta Haselberger states that “the evolutionists regarded as art only those phenomena, the counterparts of which were interpreted as art in their own society.” See “Methods of Studying Ethnological Art,” *Current Anthropology* 2/4 (Oct., 1961): 341 – 384. The same attitude applied to music and theater.

<sup>11</sup> Kacke Gotrick, *Apidan Theater and Modern Drama: A Study in a Traditional Yoruba Theater and Its Influence on Modern Drama by Yoruba Playwrights* (Stockholm, Sweden: Almqvista & Wiskell International, 1984).

addition to the agenda discussed above, was concerned with the preservation of African cultures as monolithic reminders of humanity's past. The article thus highlights the beginning of a steering of research trends toward the search for valuation and analytical methods based on Yoruba experience. Beier's own cultural journal *Black Orpheus*, founded in 1957, along with other journals such as *Nigerian Field* and *Nigeria Magazine* created a forum for a new expression of cultural relevance in scholarly writing. This trend continues to be perpetuated today through journals such as *Research in African Literatures*, *The Black Perspective in Music*, *Black Music Research Journal* and *Transition*. By the early 1960s, several scholars had begun to apply purely literary and content analysis in their criticism.

It was not until the late 1960s that extensive critical studies on Yoruba theater began to emerge. Oyin Ogunba's 1967 dissertation on the ritual drama and festivals of the Ijebu was path breaking in this regard.<sup>12</sup> This was followed in 1969 by Joel Adedeji's dissertation on *alarinjo* theater in which he constructs a historiography of the genre based on oral and written sources. Adedeji was the first scholar of major influence to theorize that *alarinjo*, the traditional traveling theater of the Yoruba developed from ritual, specifically the *egungun* ritual play.<sup>13</sup> Adedeji was the first scholar of major influence to theorize that *alarinjo*, the traditional traveling theater of the Yoruba developed from ritual, specifically the *egungun* ritual play. By so doing, he placed Yoruba theatre scholarship within the then universally prevailing theory of the ritualistic origins of theater. His work has remained a major source material for subsequent scholars of Yoruba theater.

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<sup>12</sup> Oyin Ogunba, "Ritual Drama of the Ijebu: A Study of Indigenous Festivals," (PhD diss., University of Ibadan, 1967).

<sup>13</sup> Joel Adedeji, "The Alarinjo Theater: The Study of a Yoruba Traditional Art from It's Earliest Beginnings to the Present Time," (PhD diss., University of Ibadan, 1969).

Departing from Adedeji's line of reasoning, Oyekan Owomoyela, in 1970, published his dissertation, "Folklore and the Rise of Theater among the Yoruba," in which he considered folklore rather than ritual *per se* as the root of Yoruba theatrical expression. Even today, the place of ritual in the origins of theater among the Yoruba continues to be debated.<sup>14</sup> Beyond this divergent theoretical view, however, the significance of the research carried out by Ogunba, Adedeji, Owomoyela and others of the period is that they represent an authorial shift in scholarship. Up until then, much that had been written on Yoruba theater was by Western researchers whose interest in Yoruba theater occupied a small space in their larger anthropological, sociological, literary, or other related disciplinary scope. For the new Yoruba scholars, the study of Yoruba literature and culture was more than a disciplinary aside, it was a major goal. We therefore witness in their works a greater emphasis on contextual evaluation and analysis, a pattern which set the precedence for other scholars, Nigerian and Western alike.

During the 70s, essays covering a wide range of perspectives on Yoruba theater continued to appear in leading Africa-oriented journals such as *Research in African Literatures*, *African Arts*, *Black Music Research Journal* etc. Many of these studies addressed specific forms within Yoruba theatrical culture.<sup>15</sup> Others were case studies of individual playwrights and their corpus,<sup>16</sup> while yet others were comparative in scope.<sup>17</sup> Most of them utilized some type of

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<sup>14</sup> See Yemi Ogunbiyi, "Nigerian Theater and Drama: A Critical Profile," in *Drama and Theater in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*, ed. Yemi Ogunbiyi (Nigeria Magazine, 1981); Wole Soyinka, "Theater in African Traditional Cultures: Survival Patterns," in *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture*, (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1988).

<sup>15</sup> For example, see Oludare Olajubu, "Iwi: Egungun Chants – An Introduction," in *Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Literatures*, ed. Lindfors Bernth (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1976): 3-26.

<sup>16</sup> For example, see Eldred D. Jones, *Wole Soyinka* (New York: Twayne, 1973).

<sup>17</sup> For example, see June Clara Balistreri, "The Traditional Elements of the Yoruba Alarinjo Theater in Wole Soyinka's Plays" (PhD diss., University of Colorado, 1978).

culturally relevant analytical framework.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the most ground-breaking of such works is *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976), a collection of essays by Wole Soyinka in which he brings Yoruba cosmological views together with Western literary theory in creating a new critical discourse for African theater. With regard to case studies, Ebun Clark's study on Hubert Ogunde<sup>19</sup> set the pace in 1979 as the first in-depth biographical study of a Yoruba theatrical institution to be published. A number of similar studies have since followed, many of which remain unpublished PhD dissertations in libraries around the world.<sup>20</sup>

Ethnomusicological studies of Yoruba theatrical traditions developed in the seventies. These studies were usually extensively historical and to a lesser degree analytical in approach. Researchers working within this category included Akin Euba,<sup>21</sup> Tunji Vidal and Ademola Adegbite.<sup>22</sup>

By the eighties, a Nigerian school of theater scholars had come into its own. The most telling testimony to this development is perhaps the 1982 publication, "Drama and Theater in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book," edited by Yemi Ogunbiyi. Reacting against what the editor calls the "glib generalizations and facile critiques of particularly foreign critics whose only claim to authority on the subject is based on short vacation stints in Nigeria," the editor states that the anthology would "provide a serious starting-point for the much-needed reevaluation of Nigerian

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<sup>18</sup> In many cases essays on Yoruba theater appeared in collective volumes on Nigerian or African theater, a tradition that has continued until this date. For an early compendium of such essays, see *Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Literatures*, ed. Lindfors Bernth (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1976).

<sup>19</sup> Ebun Clark, *Hubert Ogunde: The Making of Nigerian Theatre* (London: Oxford University Press, 1980).

<sup>20</sup> These include, Christopher Antonio Brooks, "Duro Ladipo and the Moremi Legend" (PhD diss., University of Texas Austin, 1989).

<sup>21</sup> Akin Euba, "New Idioms of Music-Drama among the Yoruba: An Introductory Study," *1970 Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council*, ed. Alexander L. Ringer (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois, 1971): 23 – 48.

<sup>22</sup> Ademola Adegbite, "Oriki: A Study in Yoruba Musical Perception" (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1978)



drama and literature.”<sup>23</sup> While Ogunbiyi’s collection gave prominence to the views of Nigerian literary scholars, an ethnologically oriented balance emerged in the works of Kacke Gotrick,<sup>24</sup> Karin Barber<sup>25</sup> and other researchers who based their studies on socio-culturally informed field research and experiences.

The “in culture” approach continued into the nineties, courted by Western cultural anthropologists and music ethnographers alike. The literature produced not only studied specific performance traditions (as opposed to the holistic approach of many earlier anthropologists) but situated such studies in the context of the aesthetic and philosophical values of the cultures studied.<sup>26</sup> During this period, theater became an archetype through which notions of gender, language, politics, and self in Yoruba culture were examined, an anthropological approach which continues to be utilized.

In recent years, scholars have been eclectic in their writing. In part, this has been due to the nature of the Yoruba theatrical forms which have emerged. The performance of works like Euba’s opera, “Chaka,” for example, is fostering a new universalistic approach to African literary/musicological criticism.<sup>27</sup> Yet this new approach to criticism differs from the contextually bereft approach of the nineteenth-century anthropologists. In the new criticism, the art is first and foremost conceived of as aesthetically valid within its cultural frame of reference, and only then is scholarly appraisal attempted. However, while literary scholars have made

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<sup>23</sup> Yemi Ogunbiyi, *Drama and Theater in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*, ed. Yemi Ogunbiyi (Nigeria Magazine, 1981), xiii.

<sup>24</sup> Kacke Gotrick, *Apidan Theater and Modern Drama: A Study in a Traditional Yoruba Theater and Its Influence on Modern Drama by Yoruba Playwrights* (Stockholm, Sweden: Almqvista & Wiskell International, 1984).

<sup>25</sup> Karin Barber, “Radical Conservatism in Yoruba Popular Plays,” in *Drama and Theatre in Africa*, ed. Eckhard Breitinger and Reinhardt Sander (Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, 1986).

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Karin Barber, *The Generation of Plays: Yoruba Popular Life in Theater* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> See Barbara White, “Beyond Crossover: Akin Euba’s Intercultural Opera,” *Intercultural Musicology* 1(1999): 16; Kofi Agawu, “Chaka: An Opera in Two Chants,” *Research in African Literatures* 32/2 (Summer 2001): 196 – 198.

significant strides in this new approach, a formidable musicological discourse is only beginning to emerge.<sup>28</sup>

Generally speaking, the search for contemporary Yoruba theater's roots in traditional practices has been a prominent preoccupation of scholars since the 1960s. This, perhaps, has been fostered by the fact that various forms, traditional and modern, continue to coexist along independent, yet, fluid lines. Euba, for example, argues that Yoruba folk opera represents a successful transposition of music and other performing arts from their traditional context into modern theater.<sup>29</sup> On this note, it is important to state that the many Yoruba-influenced plays and operas which incorporate varying degrees of traditional Yoruba musico-dramatic elements represent in themselves a formidable body of research transformed into creative idioms. In this regard, therefore, the Yoruba theatrical anthology presents a scholarly experience, akin to what Euba has termed creative ethnomusicology.<sup>30</sup>

The gap in Yoruba theatrical research is a musicological one—a strange irony, considering the preponderance of music and its role in the theater of the Yoruba. Where music has been discussed, it has usually been within a broader cultural or literary context. Little or no attention has been paid to the dramatic functions of music within a theatrical framework. Even more surprising, Yoruba plays and drama have rarely if ever been considered as a distinct musical form. It is hoped that in future studies, scholars will attempt to bridge this gap, not only for the purposes of developing a self contained musicological discourse on Yoruba theater, but

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<sup>28</sup> A crowning testimony to this approach is the 2003 publication of a Norton Critical Edition on Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* edited by Simon Gikandi. Not only does the publication reflect a multidisciplinary approach, but as well a multicultural discourse which doubtless contributes to the dynamism of the field.

<sup>29</sup> Akin Euba, "Concepts of Neo-African Music as Manifested in the Yoruba Folk Opera," in *The African Diaspora: a Musical Perspective*, ed. Monson Ingrid (New York: Garland, 2002), 207 – 241.

<sup>30</sup> Akin Euba, "Intercultural Expressions in Neo-African Art Music: Methods, Models and Means," in *Essays on Music in Africa*, Vol. 2 (Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies Series, 1989).

for the broader goals of expanding the musical dimension of what truly is a multi-disciplinary field.

### **1.3. SCOPE**

An equivalent of the word “music,” used in the exclusive sense of sonic phenomena encompassing vocal and instrumental forms, does not exist in the Yoruba language. This perhaps reflects the all-inclusiveness of the Yoruba concept of performance. Among the Yoruba, as with many African cultures, the concept of performance is a seamless composite of music, dance, poetry, drama, costuming and the plastic arts. While all of these components are often integrated in a single performance, the Yoruba may simply utilize two or more of the elements at a given time.<sup>31</sup> Rarely, however, do any of the elements exist in total isolation. It follows then, from the traditional paradigm just discussed, that any consideration of music in the Yoruba sense must, even if perfunctorily, take the contributory role of related artistic forms into consideration. The same indigenous paradigm necessarily establishes the parameters of my research, which in spite of its distinctly musical focus must take into consideration the elements of dance, poetry and masking, features of the play which contribute to the Yoruba concept of performance.

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<sup>31</sup> Akin Euba, “My Approach to Neo-African Music Theater,” in *Essays on Music in Africa*, Vol.2 (Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies Series, 1989), 73.

#### 1.4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In an essay which addresses the musical dimension of Nigerian drama, ethnomusicologist and composer Meki Nzewi proposes a functional model for the application of music in Nigerian theater:

The ideal role for music and dance in drama, based on our traditional models, should be that of ideational and structural relevance to the dramatic intention. Music and dance should be synthesized and symbiotic factors conceived for projecting and propelling the plot, or used to sustain dramatic action, or to enhance the dramatic presence of an actor, location, or to evoke a psychological moment...for effective application any music or dance used (whether original compositions or adaptations) must of relevance convey the artistic-aesthetic characteristics of the music and dance of the human environment and the socio-cultural sensibilities prescribed by the theme, plot and script (if available). This proposition is viable for any modern *Nigerian* dramatic theater work without prejudice to its worldview which could be based on traditional, modern or universal theme/s. Finally, the creative personality must assert his integrity; and the audience will approve his genius.<sup>32</sup>

Nzewi's proposal, a contemporary model based on an essentially traditional paradigm, provides an appropriate framework for theorizing on Yoruba music theater, particularly with reference to its ability to serve as a means of cultural self-apprehension. The roles of music in Nigerian theater as described in the above can be summarized thus: for propelling the plot, for characterization and mood generation. A fourth can be deduced: music as a means of appealing to a communal aesthetic. It is along the lines of these broad functions that I will seek to 1) illuminate the roles of music in *Death and the Kings Horseman*, and 2) illustrate the roots of such roles in traditional practices.

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<sup>32</sup> Meki Nzewi, "Music, Dance, Drama and the Stage in Nigeria," in *Drama and Theater in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*, ed. Yemi Ogunbiyi (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981).

## 1.5. METHODOLOGY

Although Soyinka's play serves as my primary textual source, a good portion of my research draws on theories already put forward in the vast number of secondary sources on Wole Soyinka's work, particularly as they relate to *Death and the King's Horseman*. As earlier stated, many of these sources address the musical aspects of the play only marginally, focusing more on a particularly mythopoeic literary discourse. Nonetheless, they remain important for my research because of the attention they pay to Yoruba cosmology as apprehended by Soyinka. Indeed, it is within the discourse of Yoruba cosmology that the essentially evocative character of Yoruba music must rightly be situated,<sup>33</sup> for music is only one manifestation of the basic ideology of the Yoruba, an ideology which permeates every aspect of the art, culture and philosophy of the Yoruba. In order to understand the way music functions in Wole Soyinka's play, therefore, I discuss music in Yoruba life vis-à-vis its underlying ideological essence. Having understood Yoruba music from this ideological perspective, I then evaluate the extent to which Soyinka's use of music in *Horseman* adheres to the same ideology.

I had the opportunity of attending a performance of *Death and the King's Horseman* that took place on the 3 February 2005 at Washington State University. While at WSU I had the opportunity to interact with the directors, Terry Converse and Phyllis Gooden-Young. Although I do not discuss this particular performance as a case in point in my thesis, the opportunity of seeing a live performance of *Horseman* definitely gave perspective to my analysis in a way that ordinary text could not have.

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<sup>33</sup> This evocative nature of Yoruba (Nigerian) music is discussed in Fela Sowande, "Nigerian Music and Musicians: Then and Now," *Nigeria Magazine* 94, IX (1967): 256 – 257.



Figure 1: Map of Nigeria showing her neighboring African countries<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Map of Nigeria, <http://www.allafricatransel.com/images/atlas/nigeria.htm> (accessed March 9, 2005).

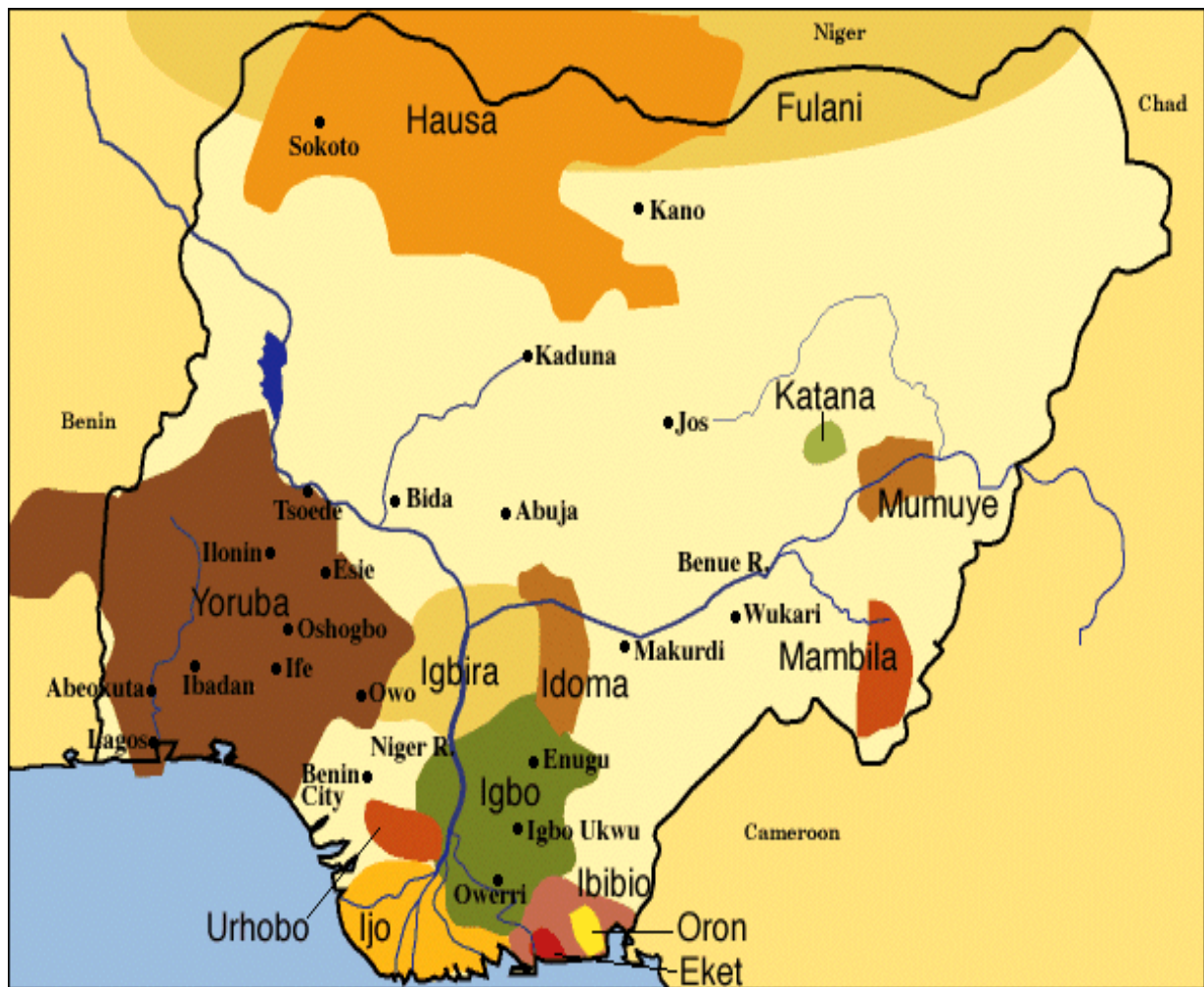


Figure 2: Map of Nigeria showing the geographical location of the Yoruba and some other major ethnic groups (large characters)<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Map of Nigeria, <http://www.uiowa.edu/~africart/toc/countries/Nigeria.html> (accessed March 9, 2005).

## **2. CHAPTER TWO: THEATER AND THE YORUBA**

### **2.1. THE YORUBA OF NIGERIA –A BRIEF HISTORICAL SURVEY**

The Yoruba can be found in several areas along the West African coast including Nigeria, Togo and the Republic of Benin. They are also to be found in several parts of the African Diaspora consisting of such countries as Brazil, Cuba and the United States, amongst others. However, it is from West African that they are believed to have migrated to other countries and it is there also that the greatest concentrations of Yoruba peoples live.

There are an estimated 29 million Yoruba in the West African country of Nigeria,<sup>36</sup> the majority of whom occupy the densely forested Southwestern region, from the Gulf of Guinea to the fringes of River Niger. Constituting the second largest ethnic group in Nigeria (the first being the Hausas), the Yoruba have a rich oral history thought to date from well before the 1300s.

Traditionally, the Yoruba are a farming people who, in addition to agriculture, practice an array of other occupations including weaving, dyeing, smithing, leather work, pottery and trade. Yoruba towns have a long history of urbanism, distinct amongst pre-colonial civilizations of the sub-Saharan tropical region. Ancient Yoruba towns, existing perhaps as early as A.D 800, have been uncovered by archeological excavations at Oyo and Ife.<sup>37</sup> Alongside this urbanization were

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<sup>36</sup> The figure stated here is based on statistics found at <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Demographics-of-Nigeria> (accessed April 11, 2005).

<sup>37</sup> Henry John Drewal, John Pemberton III and Rowland Abiodun, "The Yoruba World," in *Death and the King's Horseman: Authoritative Text Backgrounds and Contexts Criticism*, ed. Simon Gikandi (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003), 67.



complex political and social structures, many of which are still in place today. The Yoruba also lay claim to a rich artistic heritage, being custodians of naturalistic terracotta, stone, bronze and brass sculpture traditions, some of which archeological findings date around A.D 1100. The array of life-size stone figures of human beings cast in various social roles found at Esie is still a historical enigma. In addition, the Yoruba are known to be makers and lovers of music, an expressive phenomenon which permeates every facet of Yoruba existence.

Although, unified by language,<sup>38</sup> customs, religion, and claims to a common ancestry in Oduduwa,<sup>39</sup> Yoruba peoples have not always considered themselves a political unity. Even during the apogee of the powerful Oyo Empire (1650 -1750), the political structure of Yoruba country was more or less that of a loose confederation of independent city states that paid tribute to a central government. The word Yoruba was originally a designation for the people of the state of Oyo<sup>40</sup> by their northern neighbors, and has only since the 19th century come to be used for all Yoruba-speaking peoples.<sup>41</sup> Even so, the various Yoruba subcultures: Oyo, Egba, Egbado, Ijesha, Ife, Ijebu, Ekiti, Ondo, Akoko etc., continue to retain their individual identities. Although now a part of the comparatively recent political creation called Nigeria,<sup>42</sup> several kings still hold ceremonial sway over these formally independent kingdoms.

In contrast to their political multiplicity, the Yoruba lay claim to a common spiritual heritage. The city of Ile-Ife is regarded by most Yoruba not only as their spiritual home, but as

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<sup>38</sup> The Yoruba speak several dialects, many of which are considerably distinct from one another. However, there is a common lingua franca called *Yoruba*, which is thought to have derived from the Oyo dialect.

<sup>39</sup> The Ancestor of the Yoruba. Oral history tells us his children and grandchildren founded several kingdoms as far as present day Togo and the Republic of Benin.

<sup>40</sup> The state of Oyo was founded sometime before the 1400s. It was this state that expanded into the powerful empire of the same name. The Oyo empire controlled most of Yoruba country for about two centuries, meeting its final collapse in 1836.

<sup>41</sup> Based on Fadipe's reasoning, the word Yoruba became an ethnic label only around 1843 – 1856, See, N. A. Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970), 29 – 30.

<sup>42</sup> Before amalgamation of north and south in 1914, these regions of present day Nigeria were administered separately by the British colonial government.

the cradle of humanity, for it is here, oral history tells us, that Oduduwa settled when he migrated from the East (Arabia).<sup>43</sup> Even after the royal seat of power had moved to Oyo, the Yoruba to this day continue to regard the *Ooni* (monarch) of Ife as their spiritual father. We have no records of the exact date in history when Oduduwa migrated to Ile-Ife,<sup>44</sup> but we are sure that when the first Portuguese traders and explorers arrived on the coast in the fifteenth century, the Yoruba already had an established political organization in several major and minor urban states.<sup>45</sup> Mainly through trade and proselytizing activities, Yoruba country has been influenced by the Hausa/Fulani in the North, and by Europe via the threshold of the Atlantic ocean. It is in the accounts of such traders, explorers and missionaries that some of the earliest written documentations of Yoruba culture and musical practices are found.

## 2.2. THE LANGUAGE OF THE YORUBA

The language of the Yoruba is called Yoruba, and belongs to the Kwa branch of the Western Sudanic languages, a sub-group of the Niger-Congo family. Like many African languages, Yoruba is a tonal language, and as such interacts with music at an extremely intimate level. We may begin by pointing out two facts in attestation to this close-knit relationship between musical sound and meaning. First is the Yoruba preoccupation with vowels, i.e. speech sounds produced with the vocal tract open, and capable of sustaining tones: *all Yoruba nouns begin with a vowel*,

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<sup>43</sup> In the Ife version of the Yoruba myth of origin, Oduduwa descended from heaven on a chain after having created the earth with the aid of a *snail-shell* of soil and a cock. For a fuller account of this myth, see Robert Smith, *Kingdoms of the Yoruba* (Great Britain: Methuen & Co, 1969); also, S. O Biobaku, *The Origin of the Yorubas* (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information, 1955).

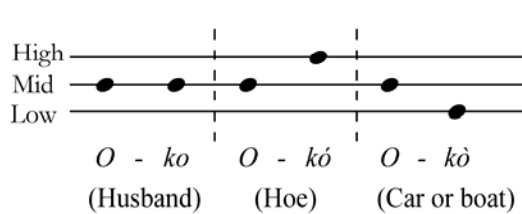
<sup>44</sup> Several historians, including Biobaku have postulated that the Yoruba migrated to their present geographical location in two waves. It was the second of these which was led by Oduduwa. This suggestion is somewhat supported by oral history which acknowledges that there was an “aboriginal” people at the site of settlement when Oduduwa’s party arrived, see Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman, 1962), 23 – 24.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Smith, *Kingdoms of the Yoruba* (Great Britain: Methuen & Co, 1969), 10.

and all Yoruba words end with a vowel (with the exception of the voiced consonant *n*). The second fact draws its effectiveness from the first. It is the use of musical instruments as speech surrogates which, interestingly, the Yoruba do not define as merely speech, but concomitantly as music. The Yoruba historian, Samuel Johnson, reporting on music *making* in Yoruba culture tells us:

Musicians also have first to learn how to manufacture the instruments they have to perform upon...Having learnt how to make their instruments, they then begin to learn how to *speak* with them, an operation to which the Yoruba language readily lends itself, as it consists chiefly in the modulation of the voice; this the instruments try to imitate.<sup>46</sup>

The intelligibility of everyday Yoruba speech is based on the ability of speakers to enunciate its vowels: *a, e, e, i, o, o, u*, along a continuum of tonal levels broadly classified into high, mid, and low. In between the three primary tonal levels occur highly graded glides. In writing, high and low tonal levels are represented by diacritic marks: ´ (acute accent), and ` (grave accent) respectively, while mid tones are usually not shown. A Yoruba word could therefore have several meanings depending on the tonal inflections used by the speaker. The following is a graphic representation of how three different meanings are derived from the same Yoruba word, based on differences in vowel intonation:



Due to the linguistic peculiarities stated in the foregoing, it is important when setting Yoruba words to music to pay heed to the natural inflection of vowels. To fail in this regard would either render the text meaningless or worse, convey a totally different, and often

<sup>46</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate* (Lagos, Nigeria: C.S.S. Bookshop, 1976), 121.

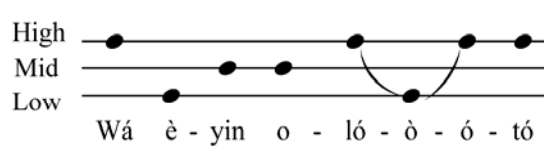
ridiculous meaning. This was the case with the translation of European hymns to Yoruba by the early Christian missionaries. For example, while “O Come all ye Faithful” translates as “*Wá, èyin olóòótó,*” in setting the same words to the German tune *adeste fidelis*, their meaning changes to “Dig up palm kernels, thou incontinent person.”<sup>47</sup>

### Example 1.

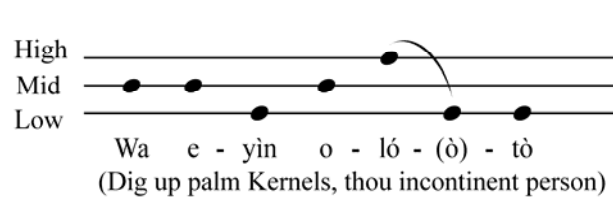
*Adeste Fidelis* (opening melodic phrase):



*Natural speech-melodic contour of Yoruba words:*



*Speech-melodic contour imposed by *adeste fidelis*:*



The above example suggests to us a salient procedure in the traditional Yoruba compositional scheme: namely, song melodies (both vocal and instrumental) grow principally out of speech melodies. This, however, is only one example of the close relationship between Yoruba speech melody and song melody. There are far more intricately complex situations as I will now proceed to show.

<sup>47</sup> This example is adapted from Fela Sowande, “Nigerian Music and Musicians: Then and Now,” *Nigeria Magazine* 94, IX (1967): 260.

For the Yoruba, sound and meaning are of equal importance. In fact, it would be quite accurate to state that in Yoruba sonic experience, sound *is* meaning. Fela Sowande expatiates on this assertion:

Our Nigerian traditional man would tell us that Sound was evocative; not that it ‘could’ be, but that by its very nature it was evocative; he would point to his ‘words of power’ or his ‘mantrams,’ which he has used time and again to produce tangible results; if he happens to be Yoruba, he would refer to those terrible vocal forms handed to him by his forefathers, such as the *Asan*, the *Ogede*, or the *Ofo*, patterns of Pure Sound, the like of which Elisha used in the Bible to call down fire on the soldiers sent to arrest him, or Jesus used to command the storm to be still. Nigerian traditional man knew – at least in Yorubaland – that through the medium of Sound, he could evoke and handle Psychic Forces of tremendous potencies, which his will could then direct as it suited his purpose. He knew this, not as theory, but as experienced fact.<sup>48</sup>

The ideas discussed by Sowande in the foregoing suggest that the task of analyzing the range of Yoruba verbal forms must be approached non-exclusively. According to Gerhard Kubik:

Taxonomy and categorization of literary and musical genres in Yoruba generally goes across that in Western languages...Even the paramount terms “music” and “oral literature” are no less vexing. In the Yoruba language there is no comparable categorization and these realms are, in fact, so intimately connected that any evaluation of Yoruba material within the framework of such categories can easily lead the student away from reality.<sup>49</sup>

Wole Soyinka expresses the same thoughts when he states that,

...it is ‘unmusical’ to separate Yoruba musical form from myth and poetry. The nature of Yoruba music is intensively the nature of its language and poetry, highly charged, symbolic, myth-embryonic.<sup>50</sup>

For the purpose of clarity, however, I will discuss the different musico-linguistic registers of the Yoruba under broad categorizations based on content and style.

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<sup>48</sup> Fela Sowande, “Nigerian Music and Musicians: Then and Now,” *Nigeria Magazine* 94, IX (1967): 256.

<sup>49</sup> Gerhard Kubik, “Alo – Yoruba Chantefables: An Integrated Approach Towards West African Music and Oral Literature,” in *African Musicology: Current Trends, A Festschrift Presented to J.H Kwabena Nketia*, Vol. 1, Jaqueline Cogdell DjeDje and William G. Carter, eds. (Atlanta: Crossroads Press, 1989), 133.

<sup>50</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 147.

### 2.2.1. Content: Linguistic Formulae

At this level, meaning is derived from speech/song content. Here, I refer to the use of proverbs (*òwe*) and other coded sayings with which the Yoruba generously garnish their everyday verbal discourse. The importance of such linguistic signifiers to the Yoruba is expressed in the saying: *òwe l'esin òrò*, proverbs are the horses on which words ride. Still within this level of signifying, the Yoruba, when speaking, may use a particular tone of voice in order to drive home the import of a message or statement. These are known as *gbólóhùn*, stressed statements said with a tone of voice evoking finality and decision. While *òwe* and *gbólóhùn* are usually short and pithy, *ìtàn* (lit: history) is a more elaborate form carrying special important messages which have implications on the shaping of society at the levels of individual lives, places, towns and nation. *Ìtàn* can be used for entertainment purposes such as *àlòó* (story, riddle or pun); or for serious purposes as *àróbá*, known as *baba ìtàn* (*àróbá*, history of histories). *Àróbá* can be considered as an extended kind of *gbólóhùn* in which history is called upon in order to drive home a weighty message as expressed in the saying: *b'ómodé ò bá gb'órò, aá gb'àróbá*, if a child does not listen to ordinary words, he will listen to *àróbá* (admonition based on his history). *Oríkì* is also historical in content, but functions exclusively within the context of praise poetry. While proverbs, contextual stresses and the recounting of history are not unique to the Yoruba, it is the tonality of the language which elevates such formulae to a “quasi-musical” state distinct from their application in non-tonal languages. I shall refer to modes of expression within this level of signifying as linguistic formulae throughout this paper.

**Table 1. Chart analysis of a non-exhaustive list of Yoruba linguistic formulae:**

Form	Nature	Types
<i>Gbólóbhùn</i>	Stressed <i>òrò</i> (words) i.e. remarks or statements involving finality and decision. Can be communicated to living and non-living things	<i>Gbólóbhùn burúkú</i> (bad <i>gbólóbhùn</i> ) <i>Èpè</i> (curse) <i>Àsè</i> (command backed by cosmic authority)
<i>Òwé</i>	Short and pithy saying, proverb or adage.	Covers an extremely wide range of imaginable topics
<i>Ìtàn</i>	Relating to history, myth, legend: has important messages which have implications for the shaping of individuals lives, places, towns, group, nation etc. Could also address or be addressed to animals, and non-living things.	<i>Àlòó</i> : Entertainment purposes i. Folktales containing songs ( <i>chantefables</i> ) ii. Riddles, puns, etc. <i>Àróbá</i> ( <i>baba ìtàn</i> ): Weighty Statements; combines the import of <i>gbólóbhùn</i> with historical content; it is history called upon for lessons. <i>Oríkè</i> : Panegyric with historical contents. Could be brief or of epic length, longer forms are invariably in poetic form.

While linguistic formulae may be conceived of as mostly content material, the modes of expression to be discussed subsequently have a more stylistic connotation.

### 2.2.2. Stylistic Registers

At this level, tonal intensity and manipulation, coupled with rhythmic modulation, generate a continuum of verbal expressive modes with varying degrees of psychic and social significance. In their generic classification, these modes range widely depending on content and vocal style. They have been described variously as heightened speech, poetry and chant. To varying degrees, each mode is linked with ritualistic or social usages by which the Yoruba interact with their

fellow Yoruba and the cosmos, and can therefore be said to have both musical and mediatory functions. Hence, while *rara*, *ege* and *ewi* have a wider, more social usage, other forms like *ijala*, the chant of the hunters and Ogun devotees, *ofo*, the incantations of priests, and *esa* or *iwi egungun*, the poetry of the *egungun* cult, have a restricted usage because of their ritualistic connections. Within this area of Yoruba verbal art, form is defined by various highly stylized methods of vocal production as well as knowledge of a textual corpus acquirable only through long and intense training. The vocal style peculiar to each form is indicated by its prefixing verb, hence, *ijala* chanters are said to sun *ijala*, that is, to cry *ijala*; *ofo* chanters are said to pe *ofo*, that is, to call or invoke *ofo*, and *ewi* chanters are said to ke *ewi*, that is, to declaim *ewi*. And while content may be drawn from a specialized corpus, the troping of linguistic formulae such as *owe*, *alo*, *itan*, *oriki* etc., drawn from wider usage is a fundamental feature.



**Table 2. Chart analysis of a non-exhaustive list of Yoruba stylistic registers:**

Style	Descriptive Verb	Action Performed	Context
<i>Emi</i> <sup>51</sup>	<i>Ke i.e.</i> to cry	<i>Ke emi: K'emi</i>	Social
<i>Ege</i>	<i>Da i.e.</i> to create, connotes inventiveness	<i>Da ege: d'ege</i>	Social
<i>Rara</i>	<i>Sun i.e.</i> to cry	<i>Sun rara</i>	Social
<i>Ijala</i>	<i>Sun i.e.</i> to cry	<i>Sun ijala: Sun'jala</i>	Hunters poetry. Hunters are Ogun devotees, hence ijala has both social and ritual associations.
<i>Esa (imi)</i>	<i>Pe i.e.</i> to call	<i>Pe esa: P'esa</i>	Ritual: Peculiar to the Egungun ritual at Oyo. There are two forms of vocal production: the guttural voice which is highly specialized and represents the voices of ancestors, and the sweet high pitched style used in all other egungun contexts, including the secular masked performances.
<i>Pipe Orisa</i>	<i>(Pi)pe i.e.</i> literarily "calling;" connotes invocation.	<i>Pipe Orisa</i>	Ritual: Strictly in the context of <i>Orisa</i> worship.

Finally, there is *orin*, song, which may be religious or secular, and which, like heightened speech may use as content any combination of the linguistic formulae.<sup>52</sup> We must be careful not to conceive of the various verbal arts just discussed as having a progressive relationship, i.e. developing from the simplest words, *oro*, through heightened speech to song. Yoruba song melodies do not always adhere to strict definitions of tones, but fluctuate freely between definite

<sup>51</sup> Although it is known as a form in and of itself, according to Akin Euba, modern Yoruba poets/chanters have appropriated the term *ewi* as a general name for all types of Yoruba poetry.

<sup>52</sup> According to my informant, there is actually another category, *Ohun*, but I have yet to fully understand this phenomenon, hence, I have left it out of my discussion on Yoruba language registers for now.

and indefinite pitches. It is, indeed, a very amorphous relationship which exists between speech and song; sound and meaning, in Yoruba practice.<sup>53</sup> To understand the verbal arts of the Yoruba, it is better to think of them as musico-linguistic registers along a non-hierarchical continuum of vocal expression. As already stated, the ultimate goal of the Yoruba musician is to speak literal verbal messages with his music. Aro Egba,<sup>54</sup> an Abeokuta chief confirmed this during an interview with the following statement: *oro ni gbogbo nkan da le lori* (words are the source on which everything is created). And yet, the language which the Yoruba musician aspires to speak through his musical instrument is already intrinsically musical. The constituents of the Yoruba verbal continuum are therefore neither independent nor self-contained, but interact fluidly with one another at various degrees.

### 2.3. THE PLACE OF MUSIC IN TRADITIONAL YORUBA LIFE

As can be deduced from the preceding, music plays a highly significant role in Yoruba life. When an infant is named, he or she is given, amongst other names an *oriki*, praise name(s).<sup>55</sup> This may be in the form of a brief appellation, or it may be a fully developed poem composed specially as a personal panegyric, a sort of poetic salutary signature which remains with the child for the rest of his or her life. As the child grows and becomes aware of the world around him or her, the first voice he or she recognizes is that of his or her mother, the first songs he or she hears, her lullabies. Through *orin alo* (story songs) and *orin isere* (play/game songs) a Yoruba

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<sup>53</sup> Euba (1988) makes the following distinctions between Yoruba song and chant forms: chants are in heightened speech, free rhythm and unaccompanied, while songs have pitches that are more discrete, are in strict rhythm and accompanied with instruments and dance.

<sup>54</sup> My assertions in this section on the language of the Yoruba are based on information elicited from *Aro Egba* (not his real name, but his title) by me during a phone interview conducted on 5 February, 2005.

<sup>55</sup> Ademola Adegbite, "Oriki: A Study in Yoruba Musical and Social Perception" (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1978), 1.

child quickly learns about the norms, morals, beliefs and values of his/her society. As he or she goes through life, he/she will hear in other types of songs and poems about his/her people's myths and history. Early in this experience, the Yoruba child would have realized that the Yoruba, through music, celebrate practically every event in life. For the Yoruba, music forms a literal soundtrack for life from birth to death. Following are broad classificatory uses of music in Yoruba culture:

- *Music for life cycle events.* Birth, age-group societies, marriage, and death are usually celebrated through music. I have already mentioned *oriki* in association with child naming. Among the Oyo and in Kabba, brides chant a special poetic form known as *ekun iyawo*, or, *egbe iyawo* on their wedding day.<sup>56</sup> Fertility songs are also used in marital contexts. Funeral rites, particularly for individuals ripe with age, are celebrated with much music-making, as in the performance of general and specialized dirges such as *aro* (a genre of dirge song-chants commonly performed), and *iremoje* (specialized funeral dirges performed by hunters for their dead comrades) which may go on for weeks unending. Comparatively recently, birthdays have been added to this cycle of commemorative events. Following are examples of a common birthday song and a funeral dirge:

**Example 2. Birthday Song<sup>57</sup>**



<sup>56</sup> Akin Euba, "An Introduction to Music in Nigeria," *Nigerian Music Review* 1 (1977): 12.

<sup>57</sup> Birthday songs are generally atypical within Yoruba tradition. The following example is a modern (*juju*?) song, probably influenced by the Christian church, hence the disregard for tone-tune relationship.

English: *Birthday celebrant,*

*It's your turn to dance*

*Hurry, come rejoice with us!*

**Example 3. Agbe: funeral dirge**

A - gbe to r'o-mo re d'a-ro o o - le - le A - lu - ko to r'o-mo re

6  
g'o-sun o o - le - le, ha - ba y'o ku t'o r'o-mo re p'a-go-go i - de o,

11  
A - wa ko le ta-ro i - won - yen, K'a ma. b'O-lu s'e-re, I - mo-ran o - le - le o.

English: *Agbe dyed itself indigo because of its child, olele*

*Aluko covered itself with the red of camwood because of its child, olele*

*This dead man forged a metal bell because of his child,*

*We can not explain all these things*

*(meaning obscure), olele o.*

- *Music for rituals and religious worship.* These include the musics of the numerous deities, *Orisa*, of the Yoruba pantheon. Yoruba deities have been described as lovers of music. Invariably, specified genres of music are sacred to many deities. These genres usually reflect the names of the instrumental ensemble central to them e.g. *bata* music of the *bata* ensemble for Sango (god of thunder and lightning), *igbin* music of the *igbin* ensemble for Obatala (creator of human beings), *ipese* music of the *ipese* ensemble for Orunmila (god of divination), *agere* music of the *agere* ensemble for Ogun (god of metal, warfare and the hunt) etc. Many Yoruba *Orisa* are deified ancestors believed to have

either created or promoted certain musics while on earth; as such they must continually be honored with such musics even as deities.<sup>58</sup>

- *Occupational music.* We may classify this under two categories. In the first category is music which is simultaneously associated with a particular occupation as well as the patron deity for that occupation. Examples are *ijala*, chanted by hunters and blacksmiths but also used in the worship of the patron deity Ogun; *iyere ifa* chanted by diviners in relation with their work as well as in veneration of Orunmila the divination deity. The second category consists of non-ritualistic occupational music such as work songs, and the street and market cries used by traders to advertise their goods.
- *Court Music.* Certain musics and ensembles are reserved for the entertainment, exaltation, and admonition of royalty. These include various vocal and instrumental forms, an example of which is *gbedu* drumming of the Oyo monarchy. Also, bards, griots, and praise-singers (*arokin*, *asunrara*, *akewi*, etc.) are usually employed by the royal court to perform eulogies in honor of the monarchy, as well as for the recounting of history.
- *Music for Satire and Social Commentary.* A major preoccupation of Yoruba musicians and artists is social commentary. The topics explored in such commentaries range widely, from moral exhortations to sociopolitical unrest and protest. In addition to the flattery which praise-singers in the employ of chiefs and royalty are expected to give, these court musicians use their privileged offices to criticize their patrons from time to time, thereby keeping them in check. Performance and ritual guilds such as *egungun*, *alaringjo*, *agemo*, and *eyo* make extensive use of satire as they comment on and reenact socially

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<sup>58</sup> See Akin Euba, "The Music of Yoruba Gods," in *Essays on Music in Africa*, Vol. 1 (Bayreuth: Iwalewa-Haus, 1988), 5 – 6.

**Example 4.** *Agemo song (social and political criticism)*

29

Verse 2. *Ajoyeje, won mo 'ra won o*

*E pe mi e ka gbon, l'enu mi*

*Ajoyeje, won mo 'ra won o*

English: *The yam thieves, they know themselves*

*Ask me and I will narrate a basket full*

*The yam thieves, they know themselves.*

Verse 2. *The crown usurpers, they know themselves*

*Ask me and I will narrate a basket full*

*The crown usurpers, they know themselves.*

**Example 5. Political Criticism**

Lá-gò-sì o n'wón bí wa sí o, Lá-gò-sì o n'wón bí wa sí, á wa ò ní san 'wó o-ní-bo -

dè; Lá-gò-sì o, ee, Lá-gò-sì o n'wón bí wa sí.

English: *Lagos is where we were born*

*Lagos is where we were born*

*We shall not be subjected to taxes*

*For Lagos is where we were born.*

**Example 6.** *Agemo song (Social criticism)*

K. K. Ya(te) re wo 'le A - ge - mo, K. K. Ya(te) re wo 'le A - ge - mo, K. K. Ya(te) re

5  
wo 'le A - ge - mo, K. K. Ya(te) re wo 'le A - ge - mo, a raO - ba i s'o - dun a o r'A - ge - mo,

10  
K. K. Ya(te) re wo 'le A - ge - mo.

English: *K.K. Yate demolished the Agemo shrine*

*K.K. Yate demolished the Agemo shrine*

*My brethren at Oba celebrated a festival*

*The Agemo masquerade did not appear*

*K.K. Yate demolished the Agemo shrine*

- *Miscellaneous Musical Types.* These include lullabies, war music, recreational music, entertainment music etc.

**Example 7.** *War (political) chant*

Ta ni l'a-wa o ni ba-ba? Ka-yi a ni ba-ba! Ta ni l'a-wa o ni ba-ba? Ka-yi a ni ba-ba!

English: *Who says we do not have a leader?*

*Enough! We have a leader!*

*Who says we do not have a leader?*

*Enough! We have a leader!*



Closely associated with musical expression is the Yoruba tendency to dramatize everything they do. Even the most mundane activities such as greetings are executed with a characteristic mimetic flare. Rather than simply saying “good day,” the traditional Yoruba breaks into a series of formalized inquiries about the other party’s health, relatives, and other known issues. In addition to these are added prayers and blessings. The procedure is attended by physical actions such as kneeling or prostrating, as appropriate,<sup>61</sup> and a wide range of gesticulations. To fail to observe these norms and gestures would be considered unsociable, for they are more than just nice pleasantries to be quickly said and abandoned. They are as Joachim Fiebach says, “...activities to conduct public life, to mediate characteristic attitudes of individuals (self-presentation), and to act out the actual positions and interrelationships in...society or, so to speak, to construct its real fabric.”<sup>62</sup>

The acting out of social roles in everyday life has been described as “natural” or “everyday” theater by Bertolt Brecht.<sup>63</sup> I might add that in most societies, “self-presentation,” or the acting out of roles, is mediated through power structures based on socially encoded hierarchies, and as such belongs to a ritualistic framework. In African contexts, these hierarchical structures exist, not just between human beings, but between human societies and the psychic forces of the cosmos around them. In such a context, ritual implies an even broader scope for expression. In African rituals and festivals, role-playing is mediated through a multiartistic framework, which celebrates both human-human and human-psychic hierarchies. This phenomenon has been aptly described as “theater,” “music theater,” and “total theater.”<sup>64</sup> But

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<sup>61</sup> In Yoruba culture, men prostrate to greet their elders, while women kneel.

<sup>62</sup> Joseph Fiebach, “Dimensions of Theatricality in Africa,” in *African Drama and Performance*, eds. John Conteh-Morgan and Tejumola Olaniyan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004): 27.

<sup>63</sup> Bertolt Brecht, “Die Straßenszene,” in *Schriften zum Theater*, ed. Werner Hecht, 74 – 91, quoted in Joseph Fiebach, “Dimensions of Theatricality in Africa,” (2004), 27.

<sup>64</sup> See Euba, 1989, 1990, 2002.

even the daily reenactment of mimetic formulae between human hierarchies is often suffused in ritual, and by implication, theatrical realization.

The role of music within the dramatic scheme of everyday Yoruba life is akin to its use for mood generation, characterization and the propelling of plot in specialized theatrical performances as discussed by Meki Nzewi.<sup>65</sup> In the royal palace, for example, music announces the going in and out of palace traffic. Such music, e.g. *oriki*, personifies through words as well as sounds the character of the individual with which it is associated. Similarly, the various moods of the king are communicated through music. By reflecting the king's mood in this manner, musicians are able to alert people within the king's vicinity to tread appropriately. Following are examples of mood music played for Olowu Dosunmu, who ruled the Owu in Abeokuta between 1918 and 1933. The first excerpt (ex. 8) reflected the king's outrage at any news of injustice, and the second (ex.9) reflects an agreeable disposition. Both excerpts were either sung or "spoken" on the drums, or, as often, played and sung simultaneously.

**Example 8.** *Olowu Dosunmu's "outrage" music*



English: *He hears of injustice and springs to fight*

*Springs to fight, springs to fight*

*He hears of injustice and springs to fight*

*A war!*

<sup>65</sup> Meki Nzewi, "Music, Dance, Drama and the Stage in Nigeria," in *Drama and Theater in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*, ed. Yemi Ogunbiyi (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981). See Theoretical Framework in chapter one of this thesis.

**Example 9.** *Olowu Dosunmu's "agreeable" music*



English: *One who can be leaned upon*

*Sure, immovable rock*

*Husband of Olusuntan*

*The dependable rock*

The characterizational function of *oriki* is not limited only to palace affiliates, but extends to all and sundry, including animals, plants, inanimate objects, towns and cities. The priest of *Osanyin* (god of herbal medicine) in extracting medicinal substances from the forest invokes the *oriki* of the appropriate roots and trees. Hunters chant the *oriki* of the animals which their profession makes them interact so closely with. Parents chant their children's *oriki* in trying to elicit a special favor, or to encourage them to undertake a noble cause or just out of sheer fondness. A wife will do the same for her husband, and vice versa.

## **2.4. YORUBA COSMOLOGY: AN AESTHETIC PARADIGM FOR THE YORUBA CREATIVE ARTIST**

Thus far, anthropologists have been interested in understanding the various dimensions of culture as social constructs reflecting hierarchical structures in place within the human interactive spheres of society. Karin Barber, discussing the making of gods in Yoruba culture, bases her

argument on such a theory. She states that the “Relationships between humans and *orisa* are in some sense a projection of relations between people in society.”<sup>66</sup> Similarly, with regard to the construction of history and cultural identity, Chris Waterman focuses on how Yoruba popular music has been influential in the making of a politically driven pan-Yoruba sensibility theretofore inexistent.<sup>67</sup> Such instrumentalist theories have great value within the general scope of academic deliberations; nonetheless, the goal of understanding a society’s culture might be innervated by a study of its myths and ideas about the cosmos—an approach less used.<sup>68</sup> Myths can be thought of as consisting of coded messages, the unlocking of which opens up a society’s worldview, and by extension, their rational for specific forms of cultural expression. Ways by which the Yoruba express culture include music and theater, the foci of this paper. It follows then, if we are to go by the assertions in the foregoing, that it is impossible to undertake an in-depth study of any of the musical or theatrical traditions of the Yoruba without taking into account, amongst other things, the cosmological dimensions of such traditions.

In answering the question of meaning in traditional Nigerian music, Fela Sowande gives a three-fold answer in which he points to the evocative nature of sound, the organization of sound into structural patterns of communication, and a cosmological basis. Regarding the latter, he states that,

...traditional music is functional at root, because it enabled its creators and practitioners to bridge the gulf between the visible and invisible worlds, thus aligning Man with God and Nature, in one and the same hierarchy, in which Nature is part of Society, and Society itself which consists of (1) the Ancestors and heroes, (2) the present generation, and (3) the next generation, all three regarded as forming one unit.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Karin Barber, “How Man Makes God in West Africa: Yoruba Attitudes Toward the Orisa,” in *Perspectives on Africa, A Reader in Culture, History and Representation*, eds. Roy Richard Grinker and Christopher B. Steiner (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 393.

<sup>67</sup> Christopher A. Waterman, “Popular Music and Pan-Yoruba Identity,” in *Readings in African Popular Culture*, ed., Karin Barber (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 49.

<sup>68</sup> Margaret Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual* (Indiana University Press: 1992) is one such exception.

<sup>69</sup> Fela Sowande, “Nigerian Music and Musicians Then and Now,” *Nigeria Magazine* 94, IX (1967): 255.

Functionality, as used in the above passage, transcends the limited scope of utilitarian discourse which has been all too frequently and somewhat fictitiously imposed on African music. What Fela Sowande refers to is a primordial archetype on which all forms of music making in any context (including contemplative or entertainment settings) are based. This philosophy surpasses music making, feeding and interconnecting Yoruba culture in all its ramifications. Indeed, it is impossible to understand Yoruba culture through Western theoretical models which tend to compartmentalize in order to analyze. Joel Adedeji has stated:

There is compatibility among all Yoruba art forms and cultural manifestations. The arts combine with religion, politics, psychology, and medical practice to construct a complete system. It is the fusion of all these elements that forms Yoruba aesthetic theory.<sup>70</sup>

In particular, Wole Soyinka draws a great deal of the thematic ideas and characterization methods used in his plays from the resources of Yoruba cosmic totality of which he is a part, and it is this fact, above all, which makes the succeeding discussion of that same cosmology important for this paper.

The universe of the Yoruba consists of compound existences simultaneously conceived of as bipartite and tripartite. In its bipartite rendition the universe consists of *aye*—the physical, temporal world of the living, and *orun*—heavenly expanse, the eternal, spiritual abode of the supreme being, Olodumare, “Prime mover of things by Whom the origin of our inhabited earth was commissioned.”<sup>71</sup> Also inhabiting the heavenly realm are the *orisa* (secondary deities), through whom Olodumare, generally perceived of as distant and removed from human affairs,<sup>72</sup> carries out his divine will on earth. Most *orisa* are deified ancestors. However, a few of them have identities quite separate from ancestorhood, and are believed to have existed in heaven

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<sup>70</sup> Joel Adedeji, “Traditional Yoruba Theatre,” *African Arts* 3/1 (Autumn 1969): 60 – 63.

<sup>71</sup> Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare, God in Yoruba Belief* (London: London Group Limited, 1962), 32.

<sup>72</sup> Henry John Drewal, John Pemberton III and Rowland Abiodun, “The Yoruba World,” in *Death and the King’s Horseman, a Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Simon Gikandi (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003), 69.

before the creation of the earth. In this category are Obatala (creator of human bodies and patron god of the deformed), *Esu* (trickster deity, ambivalent god of chance, king of the crossroads, overseer of sacred institutions and messenger of Olodumare) and Orunmila (god of divination). Other inhabitants of the heavenly realms include *ara orun* (ancestors), *omo orun* (the unborn), and other incorporeal beings. Although the heavenly realm is invisible to the temporal, the two are not imperceptible to one another. Far from being polar existences, these two worlds interact at liminal crossroads called *orita* (where three roads meet), and in other ritual and non-ritual contexts.

Rendered as tripartite, the realms of the ancestors (*ara orun*), the living (*araaye*), and the unborn (*omo orun*), interact cyclically with one another. Certain mischievous entities, *abiku* (spirit children), make it their preoccupation to slip in and out of the temporal and chthonic realms through repeated birth and rebirth to the same parents—their intermittent deaths, the cause of perpetual grief. But these are of a different category from *omo orun*, and *ara orun*; they are as earlier mentioned, *abiku*, literarily rendered “born-to-die.” Regardless of the particular mode of categorization subscribed to in conceptualizing the Yoruba cosmos—and the Yoruba do not necessarily make any concerted efforts towards exclusive differentiation of the two ideologies—the salient underlying principle is that of dynamic fluidity which characterizes the Yoruba universe.

The Yoruba believe their dead to be always with them, playing important roles in their everyday life. Although, indeed, they are departed, they are not deceased.<sup>73</sup> From their vantage spiritual plane, they continue to watch over and protect their own, and their own in turn, continue to acknowledge and supplicate them through prayers and offerings. One of the most mundane of

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<sup>73</sup> Henry John Drewal, John Pemberton III and Rowland Abiodun, “The Yoruba World,” in *Death and the King’s Horseman, a Norton Critical Edition* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003), 71.

such deferential gestures is the customary offering of the first morsels of food and drops of wine to the unseen but present ancestors before meals are eaten. The ancestors are also believed to imbue children newly born into their lineage with part of their life force (*ase*). Children of this nature are given special names, *Yetunde*, *Yejide* or *Iyabo* (mother has returned) in the case of a female child, and in the case of a male child, *Babatunde*, *Babajide* or *Babarinde* (father has returned). This continuity is however breached by a transitional gulf, an abysmal expanse across which the unborn must journey in order to enter the temporal world, and which the dead must cross again in returning to heaven. This transitional abyss is what Wole Soyinka calls “the fourth stage,” discussed extensively in his essay of the same title.<sup>74</sup>

The journey through the fourth stage is considered treacherous and fraught with uncertainties. This consciousness lies at the heart of the primordial sensibilities of the Yoruba. So pervasive is his awareness of the risk involved and his role in the securing of safe passage, that all Yoruba who hope to have children make it an obligation to show kindness to all those who ask it of them. It is an exercise in reciprocity. Even when a favor is deemed unnecessary, a persistent request is eventually granted, however grudgingly, with the words: *gba, k'o je k'omo orun mi w'aye* (take it and let my children in heaven come to the earth). In other words, the Yoruba seeks through his acts of benevolence to assuage any vengeful or evil eye (*araye*), such as witches (*aje*), wizards (*oso*), familiar spirits (*emere*),<sup>75</sup> or cosmic force which he believes has the potential of disturbing the unborn offspring's transitional journey.

It is out of the general awareness of the abysmal gulf, the need to constantly diminish and render it less threateningly remote, as Soyinka puts it, that rituals, sacrifices and ceremonies are

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<sup>74</sup> Wole Soyinka, “The Fourth Stage,” in *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 140 – 160.

<sup>75</sup> Such evil beings (principalities of this world) are believed to be in allegiance with dreadful daemons e.g. *iwin*, *egbe* etc. They are generally believed to have the ability to harness the psychic forces of the cosmos in order to inflict harm (and sometimes good) on their victims.

constantly executed.<sup>76</sup> One of the most intimate settings of this trans-cosmic interaction occurs during the *egungun* festival. During this time, the ancestors can be said to be at their closest with the living, for they manifest as masquerades who bring messages to their progeny in strange, guttural voices. It is through this “unearthly” music known as *esa egun*, mingled with the earthly strains emanating from the communal psyche of the participants/worshipers that communication occurs. Vice versa, in times of need, the living invoke the spirits of their dead ancestors by chanting their *oriki*.<sup>77</sup> Music then becomes the bridge across the dreaded transitional gulf. In Soyinka’s words, “music is the intensive language of transition and its communicant means, the catalyst and solvent of its regenerative hoard.”<sup>78</sup>

But the case of the *egungun* ritual is only a prototype. According to Wole Soyinka, the ritual archetype for the Yoruba lies in the epic of Ogun, for, “Ogun’s history is the story of the completion of Yoruba cosmogony; he encapsulates that cosmogony’s coming-into-being in his own rites of passage.”<sup>79</sup> Ogun is the Yoruba god of iron and patron deity of blacksmiths, artisans and all those who deal in metal. He is also the god of the hunt and of war. Ogun is the essence of creativity<sup>80</sup> who works closely with Obatala, the molder of human beings in the womb, in completing the processes of coming to being of humans; for, being the custodian of metal, Ogun not only provides the sculptural tools by which man is formed, but also the “finishing” implements by which the cutting of the umbilical cord, circumcision and scarification are

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<sup>76</sup> Wole Soyinka, “Morality and Aesthetics in the Ritual Archetype” in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 36.

<sup>77</sup> Karin Barber, “How Man Makes God in West Africa: Yoruba Attitudes Toward the Orisa,” in *Perspectives on Africa, A Reader in Culture, History and Representation*, eds. Roy Richard Grinker and Christopher B. Steiner (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 399.

<sup>78</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 36.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.



executed.<sup>81</sup> Although fierce and associated with carnage and bloodshed, Ogun is also known as the protector of infants and the guardian of oaths. He is the primordial path breaker, the guardian of the road, prince of deities and primeval embodiment of the Will. According to Soyinka's rendering of the Ogun myth, it was Ogun who first crossed the impregnable abyss of transition in order to reconcile the gods and man.<sup>82</sup> Other deities had failed in this task until Ogun who, through the use of metal, forged the primordial instrument by which the impregnable barrier between the gods and man was demolished. However, because he embodies the contradictory essences of good and vice, what Soyinka calls the creative-destructive principle,<sup>83</sup> Ogun naturally becomes the Yoruba archetypal tragic character. Both Bolaji Idowu (1960) and Wole Soyinka (1976) discuss the principal place of Ogun in Yoruba traditional cosmology, however, it is Soyinka who theorizes on his role as the archetypal protagonist whose visceral example defines the essence of Yoruba tragic aesthetic.

In one of the Ogun myths commonly recounted, the divinity is implored by the people of Ire, a town in Yorubaland, to become their king. The gesture was in gratitude for protecting Ire from an enemy attack. Ogun, however, refused the crown, returning to his solitary home in the mountains. After much pleading and much refusal, Ogun finally submitted to Ire's wish and was crowned King. Subsequent wars came, and Ogun repeatedly led his people to victory. But during the course of one fateful battle, Ogun, having completely slaughtered the enemy, turned on his own subjects, and because he was inebriated with palm wine, did not see his fatal error until well after the deed. Yet Ogun till today is a principal deity in Ire, loved and revered by the very ones he pillaged. He is known as *Ogun oni're*, (Ogun of Ire). The episode just described clearly

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<sup>81</sup> It is important to note that neither *Obatala* nor *Ogun* give life, for the act of imparting breath of life is in the sole preserve of *Olorun*, the Supreme being.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

evinces the duality central to Ogun's character: he is noble warrior and savage predator, kind protector and sadistic plunderer, benefactor and brute, creative essence and destructive force.

Beyond Ogun's saga, however, what is at work here is a convergence of polarities, fundamental to what Soyinka calls the Yoruba metaphysics of accommodation and resolution.<sup>84</sup> It is within the cosmic ambience of oppositions which is the transitional gulf of the Yoruba, that the penetrating Will, what Soyinka equates with Ogun, emerges. What then is the Will of the Yoruba? It is a manifestation of his acknowledgement, first, of the opposing psychic and cosmic forces which constitute the matter of his world, and ultimately, the conscious effort made through propitiatory ritual to harness and harmonize nature's forces, positive or negative, for his own benefit.

Just as in physics where opposites attract, in Yoruba thought, complementarity is born out of opposition, and resolution, or the Will, of conflict. Derek Wright, in discussing Soyinka and the Yoruba Worldview sheds considerable light on the matter:

It is the...principle of complementarity, by which things generate from within themselves the energy to embrace their opposites, that carries life across the gaps in the continuum – between the living and unborn, childhood and maturity, old age and spirithood – and the dynamic of the process is ritual. The gods are custodians of these gulfs, so rites of transition that tap the energies of the “chthonic realm” to ease the passage between worlds are offered to them. As these same rituals are performed on behalf of the communities the gods guard, they acquire both communal and cosmic dimensions, diminishing not only the chasms between and within worlds but also those between gods and men.<sup>85</sup>

At this point, it is necessary to reiterate that the language of ritual is music. And the efficacy of Yoruba ritual music lies in its underlying communal aesthetic. It is through music that the deities are invoked. Music is the tool by which the votary enters into a state of trance or possession. The choric music of the communicants sustains this transitional state, keeping the

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<sup>84</sup> Wole Soyinka, “The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy,” in *Art, Dialogue and Outrage*, ed. Biodun Jeyifo (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1988), 30.

<sup>85</sup> Derek Wright, *Soyinka Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 11.

pathway between worlds accessible. The ensuing prophecies are borne on the “mythopoeic strains” of the possessed lyricist who “speaks, sings and dances in authentic archetypal images from within the abyss.”<sup>86</sup>

Derek Wright puts it succinctly when he states that it is: “In this twilight zone or fourth dimension [that] many of Soyinka’s plays are set...”<sup>87</sup> Indeed, it is possible to conceive of *Death and the King’s Horseman* as an extended ritual.<sup>88</sup> The playwright himself seems to suggest this approach:

The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind – the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links all: transition. *Death and the King’s Horseman* can be fully realized only through an evocation of music from the abyss of transition.<sup>89</sup>

The tragedy which unfolds in the play is in actuality that of the dead Alaafin (king) of Oyo as he fumbles blindly through the transitional void, waiting in vain for the lead of his chief horseman. But it is also the tragedy of Elesin who, conflicted by the opposing desire of fleshly gratification and the need to heed the spiritual call on his life, failed to “raise his WILL to cut the thread of life at the summons of the drums...” The play’s climax is mediated by the Ogunian gesture of the real tragic hero of the play, Olunde (son of Elesin), who “Because he could not let honour fly out of doors...stopped it with his life.”

So, for Soyinka, Yoruba cosmic myth not only provides the archetypal protagonist, but also a mythopoeic framework upon which plot and the corresponding dimensions of its

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<sup>86</sup> Wole Soyinka, “The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy,” in *Art, Dialogue and Outrage*, ed. Biodun Jeyifo (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1988), 30.

<sup>87</sup> Derek Wright, *Soyinka Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 11.

<sup>88</sup> Indeed, this was the approach used by Terry Converse and Phyllis Gooden-Young, co-directors of a recent performance of the play at Washington State University, Pullman.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

realization are structured. These dimensions, whether they be metaphysical or socio-cultural, are mediated through the ritual language of music.<sup>90</sup>

## **2.5. YORUBA THEATER: A HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF YORUBA THEATRICAL FORMS**

The question of the origins and nature of Yoruba theater is a long-debated and vexed one. This confusion is not uninfluenced by the ontological vagaries which exist in Western scholarship over the definition and form of drama. The earliest researchers of African cultures were European scholars who, as earlier discussed,<sup>91</sup> were interested in these cultures only in as much as they provided extant evidences—imagined or otherwise—on the primitive, and therefore inaccessible, past of European cultures. This evolutionist groping into the past formed the theoretical and analytical framework upon which ideas on African cultures were formed. Because the studied eventually became colonized, meaning they internalized the ideas, terminology, and culture of the colonizers, Euro-America inevitably became a sort of “center-academe” through which the ideas of emergent African scholars—however “revolutionary”—were endorsed and then dispersed to the rest of the world. Today, the dynamics of interaction between the non-Western periphery and the Western epicenter are being seriously revised in response to prevailing socio-political and cultural developments at both centers.

Proffering an opposing alternative to the ideas of the evolutionary school were those who applied an ostensibly more objective analytical approach to the study of African theater. These scholars, while appearing to approach African theatrical forms on the bases of their own cultural

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<sup>90</sup> These ideas are discussed further in chapter three.

<sup>91</sup> See State of Research, Chapter 1

value, only set them up against Western definitions perceived of as standard, the inadvertent result being the alienation of certain non-Western forms from a constructed universal scheme. On encountering African practices which challenged the clear cut—or not so rigidly delineated—ideas of theater, its nature and origins, such scholars found it necessary to draw up parameters of definition and exclusion where they may or may not have necessarily existed or been so firmly implemented beforehand. Ruth Finnegan was particularly inventive in this regard. Surveying a series of admittedly dramatic forms from diverse areas of sub-Saharan Africa, Finnegan singles out the comedies of certain Mande-speaking peoples of West Africa as being the closest to European ideas of drama but declares that such practices are the exception and not the rule in Africa. The vast majority of dramatic forms in Africa, she states, do not adhere to the fundamental parameters by which strict drama is defined. These fundamentals, according to Finnegan are:

...the idea of enactment, of representation through actors who imitate persons and events...linguistic concept; plot; the represented interaction of several characters, specialized scenery, etc often music; and – of particular importance in most African performances – dance.<sup>92</sup>

By applying the above criteria, Finnegan is able to make some interesting deductions. Although the story teller mimics actions and interacts in choric responsorial with her audience, the facts of too little characterization, the combined use of *dramatic* dialogue and solo narrative, and the use of a “single actor” disqualifies her art from the category of drama. Does this parameter also nullify early Greek drama which used only one actor and a chorus until Aeschylus 525 - 455 BC., renowned as the father of Greek tragedy, introduced the second actor? The puppet shows performed in Bornu state of northern Nigeria are dramatic because of the use of actors, costuming, a clear plot, dialogue and distinct characters but Finnegan is hesitant to call

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<sup>92</sup> Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 501.

them drama because they are not regarded as a serious art form. The Khomani “Bushman” plays of Bantu Africa are equally dramatic, consisting of plot, costuming and actors, but fall short with regard to the linguistic element since action is portrayed only through mime. Do the slapstick comedies of the silent film era then qualify? Masquerade performances, though highly entertaining, fall short of being drama because of their connection with religion. What are we to make of the miracle, morality, and mystery plays which flourished in Europe between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries? In addition, Finnegan cites the significance of dance, preference for song over speech dialogue and the absence of the proscenium barrier in African theater as facilitating audience participation in a manner not typical of *recent* Western drama. Finnegan then, conveniently, concludes:

There is no tradition in Africa or artistic performances which include all the elements which *might* be demanded in a strict definition of drama – *at least not with the emphases to which we are accustomed.*<sup>93</sup>

But Finnegan does in fact dent her own argument with the following finishing remarks:

Though there may be no ‘plays’ in quite the Western sense, these indigenous forms nevertheless possess some of the elements we associate with drama. *They present a dramatic representation of life in a detached and yet somehow more direct and active way than can be conveyed through descriptive words alone.* (emphasis mine)<sup>94</sup>

The reader cannot but wonder, if Finnegan admits that the theatrical forms surveyed do indeed achieve a quality of dramatic representation unattainable through mere words, what she calls the linguistic element, why then does she use the same musical elements as instruments of alienation rather than incorporation into the universal scope of defining drama? Finnegan’s study, more than anything, highlights the ontological crisis which I started out saying has long plagued historical studies in Yoruba theater.

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 516.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 517.

There is another dimension at which this already vexing situation is even more compounded. While European scholars continue to theorize on the nature of theater and drama, the active practitioners of the field have, in what is often described as post-modern and innovative, increasingly gravitated toward forms of dramatic expression which in spirit and style strongly evoke those same theatrical practices which when encountered on African soil were discountenanced. June Balistreri addresses this issue:

The creation of a “total theater” incorporating the elements of song, dance, music and speech has been the desired goal of many modern Western playwrights and directors such as Brecht, Artaud, Grotowski, and Brook. Strangely enough, this hard-to-achieve goal (for Westerners) has become an easy-to-tread path for an African playwright. Since these elements are so much part of the living tradition of Africa seen in daily life, rituals, festivals and the traditional theatre, their incorporation into modern African drama is not only natural but expected by both African and non-African audiences.<sup>95</sup>

If evolutionary theory is anything to go by, must we then conclude that Western culture is in a state of retrogression? If not, that is, if we concede that drama is a flexible concept able to accommodate post-modernist developments in Western theater, is it not logical to extend this same concession to African forms formally considered as falling outside the normal conventions of the European definition of the term? Obviously, what we are dealing with here is a headlong collision of the center-periphery politics of reification with long unquestioned theoretical prescriptions, and the implication for African scholars is that they are compelled to establish self-determined parameters by which they can evaluate and describe their own artistic forms while making sense of these same forms within the broader global discourses which history has associated them with. To this end, Soyinka has theorized that:

...instead of considering festivals from one point of view only – that of providing, in a primitive form, the ingredients of drama – we may even begin examining the opposite

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<sup>95</sup> June Clara Balistreri, “The Traditional Elements of the Yoruba Alarinjo Theater in Wole Soyinka’s Plays” (PhD diss., University of Colorado, 1978), 211.

point of view: that contemporary drama, as we experience it today, is a contraction of drama, necessitated by the productive order of society in other directions.<sup>96</sup>

The ideas expressed in the above quote certainly seem to appropriate the Yoruba situation, a survey of which I will now undertake.

### **2.5.1. 1500 – 1860: Traditional and Ritual Forms**

Yoruba ritual has already been described as having strong dramatic features. High points of dramatic enactments during festivals could be pointed at: the duel scene of the Edi festival of Ile-Ife, the *Ajagemo-Oluwin* episode which climaxes the annual Obatala festival, and other such multi-media and multi-structural enactments performed during annual festivals in honor of Yoruba deities such as Ogun, Osun and Sango. While most of these rituals have retained their pristine sacredness, over time, one in particular, the *egungun* rite, has yielded a secular branch which is recognized as the traditional theater of the Yoruba.

On Wednesday, February 22, 1826, the British explorers Hugh Clapperton and Richard Lander experienced one such indigenous performance. The performance, a mask, was commissioned by Alaafin Mansola (Matoju) of the Oyo empire in honor of the explorers' seven-week visit to Katunga (old Oyo).<sup>97</sup> In his *Journal of a Second Expedition into the Interior of Africa*, Clapperton gives a vivid account of the performance (which he called a play or pantomime for lack of familiarity) as consisting of three acts, choral interludes, instrumental music, and elaborate masks. The highlight of the performance was what he described as the mask of the "white devil," in which the actor covered in "white wax" was "miserably thin, and starved with cold...frequently taking snuff...[and] treading as the most tender-footed white man would do in walking bare-footed, for the first time, over new frozen ground." Clapperton added that the

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<sup>96</sup>Wole Soyinka, "Theater in African Traditional Cultures," in *Death and the King's Horseman: Authoritative Text Backgrounds and Contexts Criticism*, ed., Simon Gikandi (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003), 94.

<sup>97</sup> Joel Adedeji, "Alarinjo: The Traditional Yoruba Traveling Theater," in *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*, ed. Yemi Ogunbiyi (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981), 221.



delighted “spectators often appealed to us, as to the excellence of the performance...and certainly the actor burlesqued the part to admiration.”<sup>98</sup> It is interesting that at a time when European scholars refused to ascribe any real aesthetic value to African artistic expression, the unassuming accounts of a moderately educated English explorer presented a contrasting view. Clapperton and Lander’s accounts are in fact the first written descriptions of what has now been rightly identified as *alarinjo*, the traditional theater of the Yoruba. Subsequent research on *alarinjo* theater situates its origins in the *egungun* ritual play which began as a funerary ruse to perpetuate the memory of dead Oyo kings as not deceased but transformed and existing in a different form—the masquerade. According to Adedeji, it was during the reign of Alaafin Ogbolu, “who acceded to the throne at Oyo Igboho about 1590,” that the *egungun* rite emerged into court entertainment.<sup>99</sup> By the middle of the eighteenth century, the court mask<sup>100</sup> had moved out of the royal court and developed into an itinerant theater distinct from its ritual beginnings. However, although *alarinjo* theater grew out of *egungun* ritual practice, it did not obliterate its source. On the contrary, both the theater and the cult continue to coexist along mutual lines:

The cult members and the masque dramaturges are still bound together by ancestor worship and meet during the funeral ceremony of any member of the Egungun Society.<sup>101</sup>

During the period of external contact with the Muslim north and Christian Europe Yoruba society suffered severe cultural emasculation which adversely affected *alarinjo* theater. In line with the goals of proselytization nurtured by both external parties, traditional practices, including theatrical arts, were banned. This was because of the association of such arts with the religion of the Yoruba conceived of as pagan and therefore incompatible with Christianity or

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<sup>98</sup> Hugh Clapperton, *Journal of a Second Expedition* (London: Frank Cass & Co, 1966), 55 – 56.

<sup>99</sup> Joel Adedeji, “Alarinjo: The Traditional Yoruba Travelling Theatre,” in *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*, ed. Yemi Ogunbiyi (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981), 221.

<sup>100</sup> Court mask here refers to the form of royal entertainment which developed in the Yoruba courts, and is unrelated to the English form of entertainment which developed around the same time.

<sup>101</sup> Joel Adedeji, “Alarinjo: The Traditional Yoruba Travelling Theatre,” in *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*, ed. Yemi Ogunbiyi (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981), 233.

Islam. The devastating effects of the Yoruba internecine wars, which eventually led to the fall of the Oyo empire, and the raiding activities of agents of the transatlantic slave trade aggravated the situation. *Alarinjo*, the traditional traveling theater of the Yoruba, thus went underground. But the theater never actually died. In spite of the hostile influences of Islam, Christianity and the slave trade both *alarinjo* and *egungun* traditions continue to exist as distinct theatrical forms alongside emergent modern forms of theater.<sup>102</sup>

By 1700, Lagos had been founded as a colony of Benin.<sup>103</sup> As a result of the British anti-slavery act passed in 1807, freed slaves (many of whom were of Yoruba descent) returned from South America first to Sierra Leone and then to Abeokuta, Badagry and Lagos.<sup>104</sup> These Sierra Leonean returnees, called *Saros*, were distinguished from the Brazilian and Cuban returnees called *Amaros* or *Emancipados*, also of Yoruba descent, who settled in Lagos at about the same time. Missionary/colonial activity and trade also furnished Lagos with a sizable number of Europeans. By the dawn of the nineteenth century, Lagos, Abeokuta and Badagry had become cosmopolitan, and the stage was set for new developments on the cultural scene.

### **2.5.2. 1860 – 1960: Popular Traveling Theater (Folk Opera)**

By the last four decades of the nineteenth century, Western education and Christianity had become firmly entrenched in Lagos society. This acculturation was fostered by the European missionaries and the new Yoruba elite, made up of the *Saros* and *Emancipados*. While the missionaries established several schools and missions,<sup>105</sup> the black emigrants established

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<sup>102</sup> The *adamu-orisa* funeral play of Lagos, also known as *eyo*, is another outgrowth of the *egungun* tradition of Oyo. Vidal states that it was first performed on the 20 February, 1854 in honor of Oba Akintoye of Lagos. This too has remained in its sacred form and continues until now to flourish along-side *egungun* and *alarinjo* traditions.

<sup>103</sup> Benin here refers to an the Ancient Benin kingdom which has now become part of the nation of Nigeria. It is not the same as the West African nation known as Benin Republic of which the former Kingdom of Dahomey constitutes a major part.

<sup>104</sup> Bode Omojola, *Nigerian Art Music* (Ibadan: IFRA, 1995), 10.

<sup>105</sup> Prominent amongst the mission schools was CMS (Church Missionary Society) Grammar School, later known as Lagos Grammar School. It was established in 1859.

societies which provided a forum for the type of entertainment they had become accustomed to in Europe and Latin America. These societies included *The Anglo-African* (1862), *The Philharmonic* (1872), and *The Lagos Esprit de Corps* (1876). Collaborating with the missionaries, these elitist societies introduced new types of Western entertainments in Lagos. Their entertainments, or concerts, as they were generally called, included variety shows of the Victorian music hall type, American style vaudeville shows, classical music concerts, cantatas and operatic drama. By August 1861, when Lagos was ceded to the British Crown, two clear musical repertoires reflecting class tastes had emerged. While traditional music continued to flourish within indigenous communities, European-style musical and dramatic forms were actively promoted by the black and European elite. However, strict lines of distinction were soon to be challenged. According to Omojola,

The cordial relationship which existed for most of the nineteenth century among the various cultural groups in Lagos was, however, not to continue forever. Towards the end of the century, for political, economic, and cultural reasons, the Black community in Lagos began to question the dominance of the Europeans. European musical activities suffered in this process and traditional Nigerian music began to find its way into the church and on to the concert platform.<sup>106</sup>

The quest for indigenous identity eventually gave birth to the Independent African Church Movement, which advocated the Africanization of the liturgy as well as theatrical entertainment. The emergent hybrid was the Yoruba folk opera. In 1945, Hubert Ogunde (*The Black Forest, King Solomon, Bread and Bullet, Yoruba Ronu*), founded the African Music Research Party, the first modern Yoruba traveling theater company. Two other names synonymous with this form are Duro Ladipo (*Oba Koso, Moremi, Oba Waja*), and Kola Ogunmola (*The Palmwine Drinkard*). Yoruba folk operas, particularly the early shows of A. B. David, A. A. Layeni, and G. Onimole, had their beginnings in the church and were first called

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<sup>106</sup> Omojola, *Nigerian Art Music*, 16.

“native air operas.” These may really have been Services of Song styled along the European cantata or oratorio, and devoid of any real dramatic action.<sup>107</sup> It was Hubert Ogunde who pioneered the use of dramatic action and realism in “native air opera” with his first production, *The Garden of Eden and the Throne of God* (1944).<sup>108</sup> Even then, at this stage, most of the stylistic and formal features appeared to be adaptations from the Euro-American entertainments introduced by the African elite and the Europeans, as well as, perhaps, American musicals, which were a staple at the cinema.<sup>109</sup> However, in response to the growing nationalism of the period, practitioners of folk opera soon turned to their indigenous roots for artistic inspiration. Indigenous instruments were introduced, and the form and style of their productions began to resemble more that of traditional theater. Thematic content switched from biblical themes to folk tales, myths, historical episodes and social criticism.

Alongside this cultural reawakening, however, an intellectual environment was emerging, a development which would soon contribute its own distinct quota to the blossoming theatrical activities of the era. In 1948, University College of Ibadan, the first Nigerian University, was founded as an external College of the University of London.<sup>110</sup> Courses in drama and theater were introduced in 1957 and in the same year, two theater groups were formed: Arts Theater Production, involving expatriate university teachers and civil servants in Ibadan and their Nigerian friends and colleagues, and the University Dramatic Society, involving students of the English Department. In 1958, The University Dramatic Society produced Wole Soyinka’s *Lion and the Jewel*, and *The Swamp Dwellers*, both literary plays, and in 1959, an amateur university student group, Players of the Dawn, was formed. These developments within the new scholarly

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<sup>107</sup> Ebun Clark, *Hubert Ogunde: The Making of Nigerian Theater* (London: Oxford University Press), ix – x.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> Akin Euba, “Concepts of Neo-African Music as Manifested in the Yoruba Folk Opera,” in *The African Diaspora: a Musical Perspective*, ed. Monson Ingrid (New York: Garland Pub., 2002), 211.

<sup>110</sup> The University gained autonomy in 1962.

environment would serve as the impetus for the introduction and development of a new literary theater tradition that would blossom in the following decade.

Indeed, nationalism was rising to a feverish height which, by 1960, climaxed in Nigerian independence from British colonial rule. Simultaneously, a vibrant crop of scholars, authors, playwrights and musicologists was being bred in the fields of radicalism and patriotism, and the burgeoning intellectual atmosphere would reach its peak in the 1960s.

### **2.5.3. 1960 – Present: Literary Forms – Word Based and Music Based**

The political awareness which led to Nigeria's independence permeated virtually every aspect of Nigerian life. Hence, October 1, 1960 marked not only a shift in government from the British to Nigerian politicians, but celebrated a change in ideology and socio-cultural outlook.

Although, University College Ibadan had begun cultivating a literary tradition in the late 1950s, these theatrical activities (with the exception of the Soyinka plays already mentioned) were essentially Western both in content and concept, and failed to compliment the new surge for cultural and national identity which Nigerians were experiencing. By and large, literary entertainment during the pre-independent era featured operatic groups made up of a predominantly foreign cast (expatriate university professors), and a few Nigerians. Their repertoire, consisting largely of nineteenth-century European light opera was received, at the best, with indifference by the Nigerian audiences for which they played. The cultural apathy engendered by such productions at the University of Ibadan during this period is captured in the following passage from Wole Soyinka's essay, "Towards a True Theater:"

Every event in theater, every genuine effort at creative communication, entertainment, escapism, is for me, entirely valid. It is very easy to sniff for instance at the efforts of the Operatic Groups. What one must regret is the atmosphere of sterility and truly pathetic preciousness that it seems to breed. For it must never be forgotten that the opera was written for a certain society; recreating that society in Ibadan, causing an "opera expectation" in attitudes is sheer retardation. I am not of course trying to create a morality for theatrical selectiveness. *The Merry Widow* has its place in the Nigerian scene as a piece of

exoticism; the crime is that it is the forces of *The Merry Widow* which have upheld what we may call Arts Theater Mentality.<sup>111</sup>

Clearly, the conflict expressed in the above lies in the difference in European and African aesthetic values. To be sure, Nigerian adaptations of some European plays such as Molière's *Les Fourberies de Scapin*, which became *That Scoundrel Suberu*, were quite successful, having greater popular appeal with Nigerian audiences because of their adapted indigenous flavor. Beyond the divergence in cultural tastes, however, what is significant about the developments of the late 1950s is that the confluence of purely European theatrical traditions and Euro-Nigerian hybridized forms created a new type of "literary" audience which would give impetus to activities of a new breed of university-trained Nigerian playwrights. Soyinka, for example, absorbed members of the Players of the Dawn into a new group, The 1960 Masks, which performed his independence-sponsored play, *Dance of the Forests*.<sup>112</sup> The founding of another university in Western Nigeria in 1962, University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), widened the laboratory space for the new literary playwrights who continued to cultivate innovative theatrical experiments such as *The God's Are Not to Blame* (1968), Ola Rotimi's adaptation of the Greek tragedy *Oedipus*. In 1963, the University of Ibadan School of Drama collaborated with Kola Ogunmola's folk opera company, in dramatizing Amos Tutuola's novel *The Palmwine Drinkard*, and with this, a unique allegiance between the literary scene and Yoruba folk opera was established.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Wole Soyinka, "Towards a True Theater," in *Drama and Theater in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*, ed. Yemi Ogunbiyi (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981), 461.

<sup>112</sup> The play was in fact rejected by the Independence Celebrations Committee on the basis of its cutting satire on the then nascent but already embattled Nigerian political scene.

<sup>113</sup> Ogunmola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*, was actually a folk opera more in the Yoruba traveling theater style than in the literary theater style. I mention it here because as a formalized collaboration with The School of Drama, University of Ibadan, the opera marks a unique convergence of the popular and literary traditions of Yoruba theater.

In the new literary tradition, plays were conceived and written in English but conveyed in content and form a strong sense of traditional expression. Essentially, they were a nationalistic exercise in *writing Yoruba in English*. As Dan Izevbaye explains, these postcolonial plays were,

...an instrument for the recovery of identity, of tradition, even of an elusive cultural essence...a practical means of transforming the colonial word without abandoning it...the proverb and other speech forms were implanted in the structure and lexis of Queen's English, one of the highly prized benefits of the colonial educational system.<sup>114</sup>

Although the new literary plays and the earlier Yoruba folk opera are clearly distinct from one another - one having emerged within scholarly environments, and the other within the church - certain common features characterize the two genres. The extensive use of traditional song, Yoruba oral poetry, dance, instrumental music, drum texts, divination and incantations is one such feature. Another is the continued reliance on aesthetic principles based on Yoruba cosmology.

Also motivated by the search for national identity, Nigerian composers were carrying out experiments similar to those that their colleagues in the literary arts were doing. Like the literary plays which drew on Yoruba mythology and the traditional musical repertoire, these composers fused Western and African materials and idioms in their new compositions. Prominent amongst such composers were Ayo Bankole (*Cantata in Yoruba: Jona, for soprano solo, speaker in English, drum, piano, tambura and orchestra*, 1964); and, Akin Euba (*Iya Abiku, for solo dancer and African instruments*, 1965).

The new literary tradition did not thrive without raising questions in some quarters about racial identity, cultural relevance, and language barriers. According to Kacke Gotrick,

The 60s saw also a controversy in the characteristics of the "Africanness" in general and the "Africanness" of literature, theatre and criticism. The question has been in vogue since the mid-sixties. Many Western Critics have come to join the majority of their

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<sup>114</sup> Dan Izevbaye, "Death and the King's Horseman: English Translation of a Play in Yoruba," *Research in African Literatures* 28/1(Summer 1997): 154 – 170.

African colleagues maintaining that African Literature ought to express African experiences in an African way. Thus the earlier predominant rule that English criteria and values be applicable to all Anglophone literature was refuted.<sup>115</sup>

Akin Euba, describes his own personal struggle with the question of identity and language in an essay in which he discusses text setting in African composition.

It occurred to me early in my composition career (in the mid 1960s) that African composers might...look to African poets for the texts of their songs. This statement may seem to be self-evident, but the reader should consider the dilemma that I encountered in the mid 1960s, having recently (in 1957) returned from my study of composition at a British conservatory, the Trinity College of Music, London. I wanted to write African songs in English, but because that language is such a signifier of English traditions, it was not immediately clear to me how my English-language songs could be infused with an African identity. I decided that one solution to this problem was to reject British poets for Africans writing in the English language.<sup>116</sup>

The multi-linguistic problems faced by African creative artistes and scholars cannot be fully addressed in this paper. The multi-ethnicity of many African countries,<sup>117</sup> the lingering effects of their colonial experiences, the struggle for accessibility both locally and internationally, and of course, the choice of appropriate idioms for musical expression, these are some of the issues that the African composer continues to battle.

For Yoruba dramatists, one approach to the linguistic problem has been an increased attention to theater in Yoruba language. Akinwunmi Isola, in his article “Modern Yoruba Drama,” gives a chronological reading list of Yoruba plays published up until 1982. Only two of the plays were published before 1960, confirming that the writing of literary plays in Yoruba was a development which was inspired by the revival in cultural identity. Isola describes the

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<sup>115</sup> Gotrick, *Apidan*, 11-12.

<sup>116</sup> Akin Euba, “Concepts of Neo-African Music as Manifested in the Yoruba Folk Opera,” in *The African Diaspora: a Musical Perspective*, ed. Monson Ingrid (New York: Garland, 2002), 207 – 241.

<sup>117</sup> In Nigeria, for example, the composer is faced with the challenge of how to communicate with a highly diversified society where over 250 languages are spoken.



similarities between these plays and other genres of Yoruba literature as well as the *Alarinjo* tradition:

Modern Yoruba plays have something in common with other genres of Yoruba written literature: they too borrow a lot from oral literature, especially from oral poetry. So that in spite of some evidence of formal influence, modern Yoruba plays still have a strong structural link with ritual drama and traveling theater plays...There is also a generous use of songs, drumming and dancing, largely borrowed from the practice of traveling theatre groups.<sup>118</sup>

In differentiating between the Yoruba traveling theater and modern Yoruba plays, Isola points out that while, in the former tradition, plays are largely unscripted and therefore unavailable for critical studies and use by other theater companies, the opposite is true of the latter. Further, he says, “[i]n general modern Yoruba plays are longer and have more complicated plots than those of the traveling theater companies.”<sup>119</sup>

By the 1970s, a wide range of Yoruba theatrical traditions had emerged and were thriving concurrently. Nigerian composers also continued to compose large scale theatrical works. Akin Euba’s *Chaka*, first performed in 1970, carried intercultural hybridization to a new level, fusing a libretto on a South African theme with Yoruba, Ghanaian, and European musical elements. Since then, various versions of the opera have been performed internationally, including a 1998 performance of a revised score by The City of Birmingham Touring Opera.<sup>120</sup>

Generally speaking, Yoruba creative artists have acquired international recognition. Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo and Kola Ogunmola have successfully taken their operas on tour in Europe and the United States, and are listed in *Encyclopedia Britannica*. In 1986, Wole Soyinka made history when he became the first African to win the Nobel Prize for literature. In awarding the prize, the Swedish Academy for Literature cited Soyinka’s broad cultural perspective, poetic

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<sup>118</sup> Akinwunmi Isola, “Modern Yoruba Drama,” in *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Sourcebook*, ed. Yemi Ogunbiyi (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981), 400.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> This performance is available on compact disc distributed by the Music Research Institute, Point Richmond, CA.

prowess and the universality of his themes as distinguishing features of his literary works. In particular, the play, *Death and the King's Horseman* was acknowledged as the crowning synthesis of his creative genius.

Eclecticism is a characteristic feature of the works of Yoruba, and of most African creative writers and composers, particularly those of the literary tradition. For instance, in 2002, Euba's semi-staged music drama, *Orunmila's Voices: Songs from the Beginning of Time*, was premiered by the Jefferson Performing Arts Society Orchestra and Chorus. Scored for vocalists and symphony orchestra, the work draws on Yoruba mythology as preserved in the Ifa corpus of divination poetry for its text. Euba describes the work as "a celebration of deep Yoruba culture" in which he attempts "to demonstrate how the Yoruba (and by implication the African) traditional ritual and religious arts can be secularized and given a valid place in modern society."<sup>121</sup> One could look at the pervading eclecticism of Yoruba creative artists as resulting naturally from the multi-cultural setting imposed on them by colonialism and the modern global phenomenon. However, the colonial experience, or indeed any experience mediated through their art, is not limited to them, but resonates in familiar timbres with a universal body of listeners who are not necessarily Yoruba. In March 2001, Cuban born composer Tania Leon composed an opera based on Wole Soyinka's radio play, *A Scourge of Hyacinths*, which was premiered by the American Composers Orchestra. Recently, in March 2005, Leon again collaborated with Soyinka and the Yoruba choreographer, Peter Badejo in *Samarkand and Other Markets I have Known*, performed at the newly inaugurated Shaw Center for Performing Arts, Baton-Rouge, LA. Not only have Yoruba forms of theater found a place on American and European stages, but Yoruba plays are also being taught in American and European universities to generally enthusiastic response.

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<sup>121</sup> From <http://www.umc.pitt.edu/media/pcc020218/eubaside.html>, accessed 03/20/2005

What we have today is a wide range of Yoruba theatrical genres existing across international borders. All these forms continue to coexist along independent yet fluid lines, except perhaps Yoruba folk opera which, for the most part, has been subsumed into the modern telecommunications world of film and the home video. Unfortunately, this technological development has encroached on what used to be the most dynamic aspect of the form—music. The desire of television directors for a more naturalistic style led to the cutting off of song-texts, reducing folk opera to a strictly spoken form. Also, economic constraints have played a role in the waning of the operatic tradition, reducing the number of touring troupes from about one hundred in the early 1980s to a bare minimum today.<sup>122</sup> However, if the tenacity of Yoruba culture is anything to go by, perhaps we can say that folk opera, just like Alarinjo before it, has gone underground only temporarily. In what form or style it will eventually re-emerge, only time can reveal.

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<sup>122</sup> Karin Barber, “Literacy, Improvisation, and the Virtual Script in Yoruba Popular Theater,” in *African Drama and Performance*, eds. John Conteh-Morgan and Tejumola Olaniyan (Bloomington: IN, 2004), 177 – 178.

### **3. DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN, A MUSICO-DRAMATIC ANALYSIS**

#### **3.1. BACKGROUNDS AND CONTEXTS**

##### **3.1.1. History**

In 1946, Alaafin<sup>123</sup> Siyenbola Oladigbolu, monarch of the ancient Oyo Kingdom died. In accordance with tradition, he was buried the same night. A month later, his chief horseman, Olokun Esin Jinadu was to have performed the ritual act of “death” in order to lead the Alaafin’s favorite horse and dog through the passage of transition into the other world, but the act was prematurely aborted. The intervention was by Captain J. A. MacKenzie, the British Colonial District Officer who on hearing of the incident decided that such a “barbaric” custom must not be allowed to take place. Elesin’s life was thus wrenched from the purpose for which it had been lived, but more importantly, the act of intervention had strong implications on the psychic order upon which the Yoruba world had been structured for countless generations. Realizing the far-reaching effects of the intervention and its irrevocable stain on his lineage, Jinadu’s last born son, Mutana, stood in his father’s place and sacrificed his own life bringing the ritual to completion.

Soyinka, for dramaturgical purposes, situates the event two years earlier to a time when the Second World War was still going on. Also, Soyinka, in his play, reverses Olunde’s role from that of last born to the first born son of Elesin and indicates that he had been away in England studying medicine at the time of his father’s death. In order to create a workable

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<sup>123</sup> The word Alaafin literally means owner of the palace. It is the royal title of the King of Oyo.

theatrical tragedy, Soyinka makes Elesin commit suicide at the end, not within a ritual context, but due to the unbearable grief of his son's surrogate death.

### 3.1.2. **Dramatis Personae and Synopsis**

#### *Characters*

PRAISE-SINGER	
ELESIN	<i>Horseman of the King</i>
IYALOJA	<i>"Mother" of the market</i>
SIMON PILKINGS	<i>District Officer</i>
JANE PILKINGS	<i>His wife</i>
SERGEANT AMUSA	
JOSEPH	<i>Houseboy to the Pilkingses</i>
BRIDE	
H.R.H THE PRINCE	
THE RESIDENT	
AIDE-DE-CAMP	
OLUNDE	<i>Eldest son of Elesin</i>
DRUMMERS, WOMEN, YOUNG GIRLS, DANCERS AT THE BALL	

#### *I*

The scene is a "passage through a market in its closing stages." Elesin approaches the market pursued by a retinue of drummers and praise singers. The Alaafin of Oyo who died a month ago is to be buried today and as tradition requires, his chief horseman will lead him through the void of transition to the other world. As Elesin basks in the pre-ritual celebration which will culminate in his willing death, his Praise-Singer reminds him of the imminent ritual and its importance for the continued welfare of the race: "if...[our] world leaves its course and smashes on boulders of the great void, whose world will give us shelter?" Elesin replies with the story of the Not-I bird through which he assures the Praise-Singer and the now gathered market women of his readiness in the face of death. Encomiums are poured on Elesin, and he seizes the

opportunity (as custom allows) to make material demands which the market women gladly offer. However, in a shocking move Elesin demands the betrothed of Iyaloja's son. This reawakens the doubts in the minds of Elesin's followers over his preparedness for his duty. However, after much hesitation, Elesin's request is granted, for nothing must be denied one on such a crucial mission, particularly on the day of his departure. Elesin, in turn, assures them that his desire transcends fleshly lust, for in order to "travel light...Seed that will not serve the stomach on the way...[must] remain behind." The scene ends with Elesin's marriage to the young girl.

## 2

The Pilkingses tango in preparation for a masked ball to be held later the same night. Their chosen costume is the egungun regalia which was confiscated a month ago from masks celebrating the Alaafo's death. Sergeant Amusa brings Simon Pilkings a report on Elesin's ritual "suicide" but is unable to deliver his message about death to wearers of the vestments of death. An irate Pilkings eventually asks him to write his message in a note which Amusa does before he leaves. Simon and Jane wonder if the unusual drumming coming from the direction of the town has anything to do with the reported suicide. They ask their "native guide" Joseph for clarification, but cannot make sense of what he tells them. Simon Pilkings is frustrated; he promises Jane that he will investigate the issue, but insists that it must not interfere with their attendance at the ball.

A rising agitation of women's voices at the market scene is heard. Two constables led by sergeant Amusa have come to arrest Elesin in order to stop him from committing his alleged suicide. A group of young girls ridicule Amusa, calling him "the eater of white left-overs at the feast their hands have prepared." The Market women, Iyaloja, and the young girls succeed in preventing the policemen from disturbing Elesin's on-going marital consummation and the embarrassed officers leave. Elesin emerges from his bridal chamber, the ritual dance begins, the women sing a dirge and the Praise-Singer speaks to Elesin with the voice of the dead Alaafin. Elesin dances deeper into his trance, and the dirge rises as the scene closes.

A royal mask featuring the British prince. The Pilkingses dance in their egungun costumes, which prove very amusing to the royal envoy. Afterwards, Simon is alerted by the colonial resident that a riot has broken out in town over the disruption of Elesin's ritual by the colonial officers. They must avoid anything that threatens the peace of the Prince during his visit to the colony. Pilkings is ordered by the resident to go and take care of the situation. He goes, leaving Jane in the care of the aide-de-camp. Olunde enters. He has a long conversation with Jane during which he mentions that he has come back from England to bury his father whom, according to custom, will die tonight. Jane is shocked at what she considers the callousness of Olunde who speaks so lightly of his father's death. Olunde tells her he was raised to expect the event on hand and was confident in his father's enormous will to carry out the responsibility. He also draws Jane's attention to the millions of lives being lost senselessly in the ongoing Second World War as not being a crime of lesser effect, but all of Olunde's efforts to make Jane see reason only leave her more confused. Simon arrives as Olunde is ready to leave. He tries to dissuade Olunde

from leaving presently but Olunde is bent on immediately seeing to the business at hand. As Olunde makes to leave, he runs into his arrested father. Olunde is disappointed by his father's failure to perform the duty of his office. Olunde walks away, leaving his father with an insult.

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Elesin, behind bars and in chains at the residency. His recent bride sits on the floor beside the cell. Pilkings tries to pacify Elesin, but Elesin blames him for hindering him from the duty for which his whole life was lived, thereby pushing "our [the Yoruba] world from its cause." Iyaloja arrives. At first she is barred from seeing Elesin, but Elesin asks that she be let in. Iyaloja delivers a sharp scolding to Elesin for enjoying all the privileges of his office and then failing in his most crucial duty. Elesin absorbs the scolding meekly, explaining that he lost his powers when he felt the cold iron of the white man around his wrists. Iyaloja spares him no sympathy, only lashing out the more. She announces that she has come with a burden: the preferred courier of the gods. The market women arrive singing a dirge and carrying a long cylindrical object wrapped in cloth on their shoulders. The Praise-Singer and drummer also enter, participating in the dirge. Elesin receives more scolding from the Praise-Singer, who once again speaks with the voice of the dead Alaafin. The cloth is removed from the object which came in on the shoulders of the market women, now placed on the floor. It is Olunde's body. Elesin is unable to bear the shock and humiliation—the son has sacrificed himself where the father had proved hesitant. In a swift move, Elesin strangles himself with the chain around his wrists. His young widow performs her last rites (she covers Elesin's eyes and puts some earth over them), and Iyaloja leads her out. Lights fade into a black-out.



### 3.1.3. Tradition

The following account of the ritual proceedings surrounding an Alaafin's death was recorded by the pioneer Yoruba historian Rev. Samuel Johnson in his seminal publication *History of the Yorubas*.<sup>124</sup>

Besides those who are immolated at the death of the sovereign there used to be some "honourable suicides" consisting of certain members of the royal family, and some of the King's wives, and others whose title implies that they are to die with the King whenever that event occurs. With the title they received as a badge a cloth known as the "death cloth," a beautiful silk damask wrapper, which they usually arrayed themselves with on special occasions during the King's lifetime. Although the significance of this is well-understood by both themselves and their relatives, yet it is surprising to see how eager some of them used to be to obtain the office with the title and the cloth. They enjoyed great privileges during the King's lifetime. They can commit any crime with impunity. Criminals condemned to death and escaping to their houses become free. These are never immolated, they are to die honourably and voluntarily.

Of the members of the royal family and others to die were....Two titled personages not of royal blood viz., the Osi'wefa and the Olokun-esin (master of the horse) who is generally styled "Ab'obaku," i.e. one who is to die with the King.

...The custom is that each should go and die in his (or her) own home, and among his family. The spectacle is very affecting. Dressed in their "death cloth," they issue from the palace to their homes surrounded by their friends, and their drummers beating funeral dirges, eager crowds of friends and acquaintances flocking around them, pressing to have a last look at them or to say the final farewell as they march homewards. The house is full of visitors, mourners and others, some in profuse tears; mournful wailings and funeral odes are heard on all sides enough to break the stoutest heart. While the grave is digging, the coffin making, a parting feast is made for all the friends and acquaintances; and as they must die before sunset, they enjoy themselves as best as they can for that day by partaking in the choicest and favourite dishes appearing several times in changes of apparel, distributing presents with a lavish hand around, and making their last will disposing their effects. When everything is ready, the grave and the coffin approved of, they then take poison, and pass off quietly. But if it fails or is too slow to take effect, the sun is about to set, the last office is performed by the nearest relatives (by strangling or otherwise) to save themselves the memory of their kin from indelible disgrace. The body is then decently buried by relatives and funeral obsequies performed.

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<sup>124</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate* (Lagos, Nigeria: C.S.S. Bookshop, 1976), 55 – 57.

### 3.2. ANALYSIS

The following analysis attempts to identify the uses of music and dance in *Death and the King's Horseman* with the aim of highlighting the traditional models upon which these “modern” uses draw and mirror. Meki Nzewi has proposed that such uses of music and dance, if indeed they are based on an indigenous model, must ideally propel plot, aid characterization and generate mood. In addition, the music of contemporary Nigerian theater must appeal to a communal aesthetic, that is, “of relevance convey the artistic-aesthetic characteristics of the music and dance of the human environment and the socio-cultural sensibilities prescribed by the theme, plot and script...” in order that the audience may “approve his [the creative artiste’s] genius”<sup>125</sup> It is on the basis of this proposal that I will now proceed to discuss Soyinka’s uses of music and dance in *Horseman*.

#### 3.2.1. Music and Plot

The Colonial Factor is an incident, a catalytic incident merely. The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind—the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links all: transition. *Death and the King's Horseman* can be fully realized only through an evocation of music from the abyss of transition.<sup>126</sup>

When Wole Soyinka states in the prefatory note to his play that the Colonial Factor is merely a cataclysmic event, it is not, to my mind, to trivialize the events which directly impact the senses of the reader/audience of *Horseman*. Rather, it is to situate these events in a superficial dimension designed to offset the real tragedy of the play: the disruption of Yoruba cosmic order. This event is narrated in the incorporeal experience of the departed Alaafin of Oyo who wanders

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<sup>125</sup>Meki Nzewi, “Music, Dance, Drama and the Stage in Nigeria” in *Drama and Theater in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*, ed. Yemi Ogunbiyi (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981), 455 – 456. See Theoretical Framework in chapter 1.

<sup>126</sup>Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*, A Norton Critical Edition, 3.

in the void of transition because his trusted horseman hesitates. This stance clearly evinces Olunde as the tragic hero of the play, for it is he who in a final Ogunian gesture throws himself across the void in order to rescue his world from collapsing. Indeed, it is to this cosmological subtext that the moral labyrinth negotiated by Elesin and Pilkings—and their respective Yoruba and European worlds—compulsively draws us. *Death and the King's Horseman*, like many of Soyinka's plays, is set in that murky area of transition described by Derek Wright as “a no-man's-land that hangs between traditional and modern cultures, rival religious beliefs and language registers, and this world and the next.”<sup>127</sup> The *real* plot of the play, then, is an abstraction which the mind of the reader/audience must conjure. It is in this ritualistic sense that the *evocation of music* which Soyinka declares as *sine qua non* for dramatic realization is fully rationalized. For, just as in ritual, music is the solvent which helps us to assimilate *Horseman* in its full cosmic dimension.

One passage in particular which clearly illustrates how music is used to convey the cosmological conflict in the play occurs in the second act involving the Pilkingses and their “native” servant, Joseph:

JANE [shrugs]           Have it your way.  
                                   [*Awkward silence. The drumming increases in volume. Jane gets up, suddenly restless.*]  
                                   That drumming Simon, do you think it might really be connected with this ritual? It's been going on all evening.

PILKINGS                Lets ask our native guide. Joseph! Just a minute Joseph. [JOSEPH *re-enters.*] What's the drumming about?

JOSEPH                  I don't know master.

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<sup>127</sup> Derek Wright, *Soyinka Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 11.

PILKINGS           What do you mean you don't know? It's only two years since your conversion. Don't tell me all that holy water nonsense also wiped out your tribal memory.

JOSEPH             [visibly shocked] Master!

JANE                Now you've done it.

PILKINGS           What have I done now?

JANE                Never mind. Listen Joseph, just tell me this. Is that drumming connected with dying or anything of that nature?

JOSEPH             Madam, this is what I am trying to say: I am not sure. It sounds like the death of a great chief, and then, it sounds like the wedding of a great chief. It really mix me up.

PILKINGS           Oh get back into the Kitchen. A fat lot of help you are.

JOSEPH             Yes master. [*Goes.*]

In order to understand what Joseph means by “it really mix me up,” we must look to other passages in the play. In the previous scene we witness the capricious nature of Elesin. He is spontaneous and zestful, a “born raconteur,” who in the same breath exudes charisma and a more than temperate appetite for the things of the flesh. It is quite unsettling that one such as Elesin who stands strategically between worlds is so preoccupied with the desire for material things that he even feigns offense in order to receive gifts from the market women. It is the same materialistic penchant which is at work when Elesin insists on marrying the betrothed of Iyaloja's son. In spite of the objection of the market women, and Iyaloja's initial refusal, none is willing to stand in the way of he whose voice is “already touched by the waiting fingers of our departed.” Iyaloja's answer to the objecting market women is thus: “You pray to him who is your intercessor to the world—don't set this world adrift in your time; would you rather it was my hand whose sacrilege wrenched it loose?” After much rationalization, consent is given to Elesin's wishes, the marriage is sealed, but not without stern proverbial warnings by Iyaloja:

The living must eat and drink. When the moment comes, don't turn the food to rodents' droppings in their mouth. Don't let them taste the ashes of the world when they step out at dawn to breathe the morning dew....

Eating the awusa nut is not so difficult as drinking water afterwards....

No one knows when the ants desert their home; they leave the mound intact. The swallow is never seen to peck holes in its nest when it is time to move with the season. There are always throngs of humanity behind the leave-taker. The rain should not come through the roof for them, the wind must not blow through the walls at night.

We never really come to the root of Elesin's real intent in choosing to take a bride on the day of his crucial journey of transition. Even in his hour of regret, having failed in his mission, Elesin insists that his desire for the young girl transcended fleshly lust: "I have taken countless women in my life but you were more than a desire of the flesh. I needed you as the abyss across which my body must be drawn." Yet, the same statement corroborates Iyaloja's earlier description of Elesin as having "always had a restless eye." Whatever Elesin's reasons were, the action definitely comes across as strange and confusing, and the same confusion is signified in the clashing of the mundane sounds of the dundun ensemble and the profound timbres of the royal gbedu drums; the former in celebration of an untimely marriage, and the latter beating out the imminence of Elesin's ritual. In the culture which Soyinka appropriates for the stage, different drum patterns speak distinct messages, each of which belongs to a prescribed context. In a festive or semi-festive situation such as Elesin's imminent ritual, any number of ensembles can be heard simultaneously. However, even in such a case it is diversity unified by a common context. This is not the situation in act two, and Joseph, fully aware of the norms and symbols of the culture to which he belongs, can tell that something is not quite right, hence his confession: "it really mix me up." Through this bit of musical detail—the juxtaposing of two clashing ensembles—Soyinka provides a microcosmic insight into the thematic conflict of the play. What

we are shown on stage is the indifference of the District Officer to the customs of the land in which he is a stranger. However, what we must conceptualize is the cosmic unrest generated by the strange signals sent out by conflicting ensembles. Indeed, the inability of the Pilkingses to understand their Yoruba servant and his inability to interpret the culture to them mirrors the ideological conflict recreated throughout the play; and whether in the scene just discussed or in previous or subsequent ones, music is the medium which heightens our awareness of this conflict. Dance functions in the same way throughout the play, particularly in act three when Elesin dances halfway into the other world to the sound of ritual drums. Soyinka's use of music and dance in *Horseman* therefore fulfils Nzewi's ideal for the use of music and dance as a means of propelling plot in a manner based on traditional models. The same is true of Soyinka's uses of music for characterization, mood generation and the appeal to a sense of communal aesthetics as I will also discuss.

Following is an act by act analysis of the use of music and dance in *Death and the King's Horseman*. Each event crucial to the unfolding of the plot is described as an episode.<sup>128</sup> For each episode, I highlight the musical events which occur, after which I proffer contextual possibilities which describe parallel musical events from Yoruba culture. Where applicable, I have quoted stage directions or other textual cues suggesting musical events, or contextual possibilities in order to bring the playwright's own ideas to the fore. With this format, I am able, not only to show how music and dance propel the plot, but also how such musical events are appropriated from traditional Yoruba culture.

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<sup>128</sup> In his play, Soyinka does not use the conventional terms *act* or *scene*, but simply designates each of the four acts of the play, *1,2,3,4*. However, for clarity, I employ the terms *act* and *scene* freely. In this particular analysis, the term *episode* is used to imply a defined set of actions which contribute concretely to the plot, as opposed to the broader concept of scene in which several *episodes* could occur.

## Act 1: A Passage through a market place in its closing stages....

Episode 1: Exchange between Elesin Oba and his Praise-Singer.

Musical Event: “ELESIN OBA *enters along a passage before the market pursued by his DRUMMERS and PRAISE-SINGERS. He is a man of enormous vitality, speaks dances and sings with that infectious enjoyment of life which accompanies all his actions.*”

Contextual Possibilities: Dialogue through heightened speech, described by

Soyinka in the play as “lyric stride:” may be *rara*, *ewi*, *ege*, or, probably the more stylized *ijala*, since Soyinka himself calls *ijala* “the supreme lyrical art of the Yoruba.”<sup>129</sup> Elsewhere, Soyinka has commented on the admirable success of Hubert Ogunde’s appropriation of the *rara* style for the dialogue of his folk operas, showing that there is precedence for such stylistic usage of traditional verbal forms in modern theater.<sup>130</sup> Soyinka might also have had *esa egun*<sup>131</sup> in mind since the ritual is very closely connected with *egungun*, the mask of the ancestors, for which in Oyo, this is the vocal form used. This last suggestion is given credence by the fact that the Praise-Singer does indeed become a medium through which the dead king speaks later on in the play. The use of a guttural voice typical of the *egungun* mediums in delivering the lines just mentioned has definitely been exploited by directors in different performances of the play. This was the case in a 1990 production by the Royal Exchange Theater,

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<sup>129</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 27.

<sup>130</sup> Wole Soyinka, “Theater in African Traditional Cultures,” in *Death and the King’s Horseman: Authoritative Text Backgrounds and Contexts Criticism*, ed. Simon Gikandi (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003), 102.

<sup>131</sup> *Esa egun* is also known as *iwi egun*.

Manchester, in which the traditional Yoruba musicians Tunji Oyelana and Muraina Oyelami played Elesin and Praise-Singer respectively. In fact, so compelling was the poetic imagery and rhythm of the first act to director Phyllida Loyd that she played with the idea of having the entire act rendered in Yoruba. Also, in a personal conversation with Femi Euba (the first *Olunde*), he stated that Soyinka has used *ewi* and English simultaneously in productions. While we may not be able to pin down the exact traditional model Soyinka had in mind, or if indeed he was thinking of any one specific model when he wrote the play, the scene is a very successful recreation of the real life event which Samuel Johnson describes thus:

“they issue from the palace to their homes surrounded by their friends, and their drummers beating funeral dirges, eager crowds of friends and acquaintances flocking around them, pressing near to have a last look at them or to say the final farewell as they march homewards.”<sup>132</sup>

Episode 2: The Story of the *Not-I-Bird*.

Musical Event: “ELESIN *executes a brief, half-taunting dance. The DRUMMER moves in and draws a rhythm out of his steps. ELESIN dances towards the market-place as he chants the story of the Not-I-bird, his voice changing dexterously to mimic his characters. He performs like a born raconteur, infecting his retinue with his humour and energy. More WOMEN arrive during his recital including IYALOJA.*”

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<sup>132</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate* (Lagos, Nigeria: C.S.S. Bookshop, 1976), 56.



Contextual Possibilities: It is very likely that the particular vocal style used during *episode 1* is the one which Elesin continues to utilize in his performance of the *Not-I bird* sequence. As a “born raconteur,” the kind of technical mastery required for any of the wide range of characters mimicked in the song requires great skill attainable only through specialization. Any of the Yoruba vocal forms can incorporate the entertaining character of Elesin’s delivery which really is an extended metaphor on the dread of death. However, the formal elements of Elesin’s delivery resemble the structure of *iwi egungun*, described by Oludare Olajubu in his expose on the form.<sup>133</sup> Indeed, the story telling, mimicry of social types, the use of proverbs, puns etc, and audience participation places this rendition in the *alarinjo* tradition for which the vocal style is rightly *iwi egungun* poetry.<sup>134</sup>

Episode 3: Stop! Enough of that!

Musical Event: None.

Episode 4: He forgives us. He forgives us.

Musical Events: Song by Iyaloja, Chorus of Market Women and Praise-Singer;  
Dancing and Singing around Elesin.

Contextual Possibilities: Easily situated in the activities which take place on the day of departure of a close associate of the Alaafin as described by Johnson, (refer to *Act 1, episode 1: contextual possibilities*). The script strongly suggests that the singing and dancing are spontaneous. Such

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<sup>133</sup> Oludare Olajubu, “Iwi Egungun Chants – An Introduction,” in *Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Literatures*, ed., Bernth Lindfors (Three Continents Press; Washington, D.C, 1976), 3 -26.

<sup>134</sup> The stylistic features of Alarinjo are discussed in more detail under Music and Characterization, pp. 72 – 82.

extemporaneous performances are typical in Yoruba settings (*refer to Act 3, episode 1: contextual possibilities*).

Episode 5: ...*a beautiful YOUNG GIRL, comes along through the passage through which Elesin first made his entry.*

Musical Events: Elesin rhapsodizes on the “beautiful YOUNG GIRL” whom he later takes as bride; Praise-singer flatters Elesin with panegyrics. Elesin continues to rhapsodize as he makes a case for the hand of the young girl in marriage; the wedding.

Contextual Possibilities: Elesin’s rhapsodic utterances both in praise of the beautiful young girl, and later in justifying his desire are quite ambiguous in style. While the content and context of the former portion of his rhapsody may suggest the use of especially social forms such as *ege* or *rara*, the later sections may be conceived of as oscillating between forms of heightened speech and ordinary declamations. The use of a heightened speech style in rhapsodizing can be seen as seductively manipulating the emotional response of his hearers as well as creating a compelling mystic aura which makes Iyaloja declare in concession: “The voice I hear is already touched by the waiting fingers of the departed.” The term voice must be understood in this context as connoting authority both in tone and import, and falls under the category of Yoruba verbal forms such as *gbolohun*. Elesin’s rhapsodies bestraddle the praise-singer’s panegyrics which certainly fit the stylistic and contextual framework of *oriki*. Although Soyinka does not indicate that a wedding chorus be performed,

the appropriateness of such an interpolation can very well be taken for granted. Indeed, at the Pullman performance, a wedding song was inserted at the end of this scene. The exercising of such musical prerogative is a well-established practice by directors of Nigerian theater in general. The practice mirrors the spontaneity of every-day Yoruba life in which songs are raised and often composed on the spur of the moment to celebrate events, good news, or, to express not so cheerful feelings such as sadness.

**Act 2: The verandah of the District Officer's bungalow....**

Episode 1: The District Officer, Simon Pilkings, his wife Jane, and the “native” sergeant Amusa.

Musical Event: “*A tango is playing from an old hand-cranked*

*gramophone...SIMON PILKINGS and his wife, JANE, tangoing in and out of shadows in the living-room. They are wearing what is immediately apparent as some form of fancy dress (egungun costumes).*

Contextual Possibilities: The unguided mixture of foreign and Yoruba traditions.

The significance here is that the *egungun* masks worn by the Pilkingses is a sacred symbol of the afterlife in Yoruba culture, while the Tango, an Argentine dance/instrumental form is a secular form preoccupied with romance and sexual innuendos. This “unequal yoking,” in which the former element is desecrated, cleverly foreshadows the event of the confused ensembles signifying death and marriage, which later occur in the same act. This desecration of Yoruba sacred vestments is fully realized in Act 4 when Jane and Pilkings appear in their “exotic” costumes at the

ball. The violation of local traditions was quite a common behavior of the agents of colonialism. The song *K. K. Yate Wo'le Agemo* (see chapter two, “Music for Satire and Social Commentary”) refers to a real colonial officer, who in order to build a highway demolished the *Agemo* (another type of sacred mask) shrine at Oba town, in 1914.

Episode 2: Amusa Leaves, Pilkings and Jane worry about Amusa's report;

conversation with Joseph over meaning of drumming, he responds that “it really mix me up;” Joseph is sent off but drumming continues to unnerve Pilkings and Jane.

Musical Event: *Drumming from the direction of the town wells up. Drumming increases in volume*, giving off confused signals of death and marriage.

Contextual Possibilities: It is not uncommon during Yoruba festivals for several

ensembles to be playing at the same time in close proximity. The resulting sounds which might seem cacophonous to the stranger, indeed constitute the soul of Yoruba festival, the harmonizing factor being the common celebratory theme which unifies otherwise disparate rhythms. In this particular event, however, the resultant sounds are not festive harmonies, but disjointed streams. While the deep sounds of the ritual music to which Elesin must dance into the afterlife emanate from the house of Osugbo, other musicians supply the comparatively shallow music of marriage and consummation. These “other” musicians are probably praise-singers, the services of whom Elesin is certainly not in want. The music for social events such as weddings is often supplied by such musicians on the

ubiquitous *dundun* drums. In this context, it is not unusual for the praise-singers to play for the occasion as their main duty is to flatter their patron. The musicians at the house of Osugbo are, in contrast, more specialized in the sense that they are trained for that special music which accompanies the kind of event with which Elesin should really be preoccupied. The Osugbo instrument to which Soyinka makes reference in the play is the *gbedu* ensemble, royal drums of Oyo which are only played in the context of palace affairs.

Episode 3: Simon Pilkings and Jane prepare to go to the European masked ball.

Musical Event: PILKINGS *suddenly begins to hum the tango to which they were dancing before. Starts to execute a few practice steps.*

Contextual Possibilities: A restatement of the theme of desecration which opened the Act (*refer to Act 2, episode 1: contextual possibilities*).

### **Act 3: The frontage of a converted cloth stall in the market....**

Episode 1: Confrontation between sergeant Amusa and his two constables, and, market women, Iyalaja and accompanying group of young girls.

Musical Event: A WOMAN *bursts into song and dance of euphoria – ‘Tani l’awa o l’ogbeja? Kayi! A l’ogbeja. Omo kekere l’ogbeja.’ The rest of the WOMEN join in, some placing the GIRLS on their back like infants, others dancing around them. The dance becomes general, mounting in excitement.*

Contextual Possibilities: The act of bursting into “song and dance of euphoria” by the market women directly mirrors the everyday practice of the Yoruba.

Whether at the market place, at home, or on the farm, the execution of

admirable feats or the sound of good news often elicits spontaneous singing and dancing in praise of hero or harbinger. Such performances are either composed instantaneously in their entirety, or they are improvisations based on already known tunes. In the case of the latter, the inspirational element is the invention of new words, appropriate for the events, to an already existing tune. The musical feat which is in operation here is the intuitively skillful selection of words and phrases which match the tonal contour imposed by the original words of the existing tune. It is this feat that Soyinka simulates on stage when he makes the market women sing new words of relevance to a well known Yoruba war chant:

*“Tani l’awa o ni baba? Kayi! A ni baba...”*

Episode 2: The marriage is consummated; Elesin’s ritual dance and ensuing

trance. Musical Events: Elesin’s ritual dance – dirge of the women – the dead Alaafin speaks through the praise-singer – Elesin’s trance.

Contextual Possibilities: I have already asserted several times in the course of this thesis that in Yoruba culture, music is the language of ritual. Dancing into trances are common features of such rituals. During such occasions, the dancer, or any other participants in the ritual may be caught up in a state of ecstasy (solemn or frenetic) in which they assume the personality of deities or other ancestors. In this particular instance, it is the Praise-Singer who is possessed by the spirit of the dead Alaafin while Elesin dances into a deep trance. The chorus of the swaying women, *ale le le awo mi lo o* which accompanies this event is, in fact, a well known Yoruba dirge.

**Act 4: A Masque....the great hall of the Residency....**

Episode 1: The Arrival of the Prince; The Ball; Masked Procession.

Musical Events: 'Rule Britannia' played badly by the local police brass band

directed by a white conductor; Viennese waltz – the PRINCE opens the floor; The masked procession – Pilkings and Jane imitate *egungun* dances and guttural sounds.

Contextual Possibilities: Police and armed forces bands are common phenomena

in Nigeria. During colonial times they were usually under the direction of white officers who taught a strictly European repertoire. Many Yoruba people considered such Western music staid and boring (in the next section, "Music and Characterization," I discuss an *alarinjo* satire on ballroom dancing which verifies this). The appearance of the Pilkingses in *egungun* vestments within a sacrilegious setting highlights the apathy of the British colonial government to Nigerian culture in the pre-independence era. This apathy was often manifested in the kind of desecration witnessed in this scene (refer to *Act 2, episode 1: contextual possibilities*).

Episode 2: Pilkings, Resident, Jane, Aide-De-Camp, Sergeant Amusa,

deliberations over what actions to take over Elesin's imminent ritual suicide, Pilkings makes sudden exit. Musical Event: None, possibly the faint strains of the Viennese Waltz coming through.

Episode 3: Jane and Olunde converse, Aide-De-Camp intervenes, Pilkings

returns, Olunde is shocked that his father Elesin is still alive. He curses him and walks out via the path through which Elesin entered.

Musical Event: None indicated, possibly the faint strains of the Viennese Waltz coming through.

**Act 5: The Residency, Elesin in chains behind iron bars....**

Episode 1: Elesin and Pilkings converse; Jane calls Pilkings away; Elesin soliloquizes in the presence of his new bride; Pilkings and Jane return;

Pilkings goes to let in Iyaloja; Jane tries to console Elesin, she is rebutted.

Musical Event: None.

Episode 2: Dialogue: Elesin and Iyaloja, Guard intervenes; Dialogue: Pilkings,

Iyaloja and Elesin. Aide-De-Camp and Jane intervene.

Musical Event: Profuse usage of proverbs and other verbal forms taken directly from real life Yoruba discourse (this is discussed in more detail under “Music and the Communal Aesthetic”).

Episode 3: Olunde’s body is brought in on the shoulders of mourning women;

Elesin kills himself; Iyaloja consoles grieving bride. Musical Event: “*The WOMEN enter, intoning the dirge ‘Ale le le’ and swaying from side to side. On their shoulders is borne a longish object roughly like a cylindrical bolt, covered in cloth. They set it down on the spot where IYALOJA had stood earlier, and form a semi-circle round it. The PRAISE-SINGER and DRUMMER stand on the inside of the semi-circle but the drum is not used at all. The DRUMMER intones under the PRAISE-SINGERS invocations.*”



Contextual Possibilities: The traditional Yoruba dirge *Ale le le* is featured again.

The imagery and the accompanying use of music here is quite similar to that discussed already with regard to the ritual dance, only this time the person being mourned is not Elesin, but Olunde his son. The restricted use of drums under such circumstances is a common practice. (refer to *Act 3, episode 2: contextual possibilities*).

### 3.2.2. Music and Characterization

In describing the influences of traditional musical practices on the techniques of characterization employed by Wole Soyinka in *Death and the King's Horseman*, I will use *alarinjo*, the traditional theater of the Yoruba, as a comparative model. As stated in chapter two, *alarinjo* theater developed from the *egungun* ritual play into a court mask, and by the middle of the eighteenth century had developed into an itinerant form.

An *alarinjo* performance consists of short sociological sketches which analyze Yoruba society, past and present, satirizing on its vices, pests and morals. Every performance consists of three “acts,” structured as follows:

“Act”	Contents/Episodes	Characters
1: “Opening glee”	<i>Ijuba</i> (homage and pledge), Various dances, acrobatics, singing.	Chief dramaturgist Singers, musicians, dancers, acrobats and troupe members
<i>Interlude</i>	<i>Drumming and choral music</i>	<i>Musicians (drummers)</i>
2: Spectacle	Pantomime, illusions, choral chants,	Mythological characters, Totemistic characters

drum dialogue.

3: Revue	Short contemporary and historical sketches involving satire, dialogue and choral songs, closing sketch: <i>Mask of the Bride</i>	Human characters: stranger, non-stranger
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Plot and dialogue are the least developed elements of *alarinjo* theater. More like a kind of variety show, the driving and unifying forces of its many otherwise unrelated sketches are choral music, oral poetry/solo songs and dance. Alarinjo's rhythmic pulse is supplied by the *bata* ensemble consisting of four hierarchically structured drums. Improvisation plays an important role at every level of performance. The stage, an open space at the market square or private compound, is in the round. Performers are hemmed in by the audience whose participation, particularly during the revues, is of prime importance.

In Adedeji's discussion of the structural organization of *alarinjo* theater, he informs us that the "mask is the graphic and symbolic illustration of the theme and action of the drama. *Its traits are static and stereotyped.*"<sup>135</sup> He goes on to describe various categories of stock characters, namely, mythological characters, totemistic characters and "human" characters.

The mythological characters are usually representations of *orisa*, Yoruba divinities, many of whom are deified ancestors. Their masks are carved from wood, and their costumes are designed to resemble the deity as he/she is remembered or depicted in mythology. Totemistic characters personify social vices such as greed, gluttony, gossip etc. through masks which portray stereotyped facial expressions associated with these characters. Other totemistic masks depict people with physiological irregularities, *e.g.* buck teeth, dumb, hunchback, etc. or animals from Yoruba folklore, *e.g.* *ekun* (leopard), *ojola* (python), *ijapa* (tortoise) etc.

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<sup>135</sup> Joel Adedeji, *Traditional Yoruba Theater*, 60. Italics mine.

The “human” characters fall into two categories: *stranger* and *non-stranger*. In the *stranger* category are non-Yoruba characters who have some form of historical association with the Yoruba. They are usually portrayed as caricatures and their distinguishing features are exaggerated for comical or satirical ends. Always in carved wooden masks depicting their ethnicity, *stranger* characters are depicted by the peculiar profession or historic episode for which they are known by the Yoruba e.g. the Hausa butcher or *mallam*,<sup>136</sup> or the Tapa warrior. At other times, the object of satire is the socially unapproved behavior or trafficking (Adedeji’s term) associated with these stranger figures, e.g. *pansaga* (prostitute), *onibara* (alms beggar). A common stranger character is *oyinbo* (white man). The *oyinbo* skit, a popular staple, has existed in various forms since at least 1826 when Alaafin Mansola invited an itinerant company to entertain Hugh Clapperton and Richard Lander.

Non-stranger characters are Yoruba figures drawn from everyday life e.g. police, *iyawo* (bride), *baba agba* (elderly man), etc. As a rule, non-stranger characters only wear masks made of cloth. Although all human characters are subjected to some degree of satirizing, there is a philosophical rationale behind the distinguishing of stranger and non-stranger characters. Adedeji associates this distinction of roles with a noted self-pride rooted in the way the Yoruba sees himself in the world:

The non-stranger is human, while the stranger is a caricature of humanity. Religion and politics influence artistic expression a good deal, and a “holier than thou” attitude is a recognizable Yoruba trait. Strangers usually violate social taboos and are despised for deviant behavior.<sup>137</sup>

Here, Adedeji’s reasoning may be said to be overly simplified in casting people into human and “less than human” categories based on a perceived Yorubacentric attitude. However, it highlights important political and social ramifications inherent in role-casting. These ramifications are more

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<sup>136</sup> Muslim teacher.

<sup>137</sup> Adedeji, Traditional Yoruba Theater, 61.

lucidly addressed by Kacke Gotrick when she situates the non-stranger satires within a conservative theatrical framework developed by the Yoruba for the purpose of “*strengthening ethnic bonds.*”

Some dramas more than others emphasize this function [ethnic consolidation], for instance dramas portraying and, by means of satire, ridiculing other ethnic groups as is done in *Pansaga* and *Oyinbo*. By establishing failures and bad qualities of others, these dramas indirectly refer to the excellence of Yoruba culture. The very fact of marking the borders between the Yoruba and their neighbors strengthens the sense of belonging within the denoted boundaries.<sup>138</sup>

Comparing our earlier analysis on plot in Wole Soyinka’s play with the structure of *alarinjo* theater discussed above, we find already that there are a number of similarities in the developmental techniques employed by the playwright and the *alarinjo* practitioners. These lie mainly in the use of music, mime, oral poetry, masking and dance as mediators of ideas and actions. In the same manner, the characterization techniques used in *Death and the King’s Horseman* mirror those employed by the practitioners of *alarinjo*. Just as in plot development, the elements of music, mime, oral poetry, masking and dance play a fundamental role in characterization as the subsequent discussion will show.

One of the criticisms which has arisen from American readers of *Death and the King’s Horseman* is the stereotypical way in which the British characters are portrayed.<sup>139</sup> One such critic, Dr. Susan Gardner, a white American, expressed this thought to a Nigerian colleague, Tanure Ojaide, with whom she co-taught the play. Ojaide affirms in his response to Gardner, and correctly so, that “Simon Pilkings is portrayed as a typical district officer and not as an

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<sup>138</sup> Kacke Gotrick, *Apidan Theater and Modern Drama: A Study in a Traditional Yoruba Theater and its Influence on Modern Drama by Yoruba Playwrights* (Stockholm, Sweden: Almqvista & Wiskell International, 1984), 133.

<sup>139</sup> Tanure Ojaide, “Death and the King’s Horseman in the Classroom,” in *Death and the King’s Horseman: Authoritative Text Backgrounds and Contexts Criticism*, ed. Simon Gikandi (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003), 118.

individual.” Soyinka himself suggests to us that this stereotyping of Simon Pilkings was intentionally scripted:

One of the more obvious alternative structures of the play would be to make the District Officer the victim of cruel dilemma. This is not to my taste and it is not by chance that I have avoided dialogue or situation which would encourage this. No attempt should be made in the production to suggest it.

In fact Soyinka’s treatment of the entire British cast of the play recalls the *oyinbo* sketches of *alarinjo* theater. In her book *Apidan Theater and Modern Yoruba Theater* Kacke Gotrick describes several versions of *oyinbo*. In each of these descriptions, aspects of European behavior which initially appeared strange and amusing to the Yoruba or which have continued to be perceived as “un-African” even in contemporary culture are exaggerated and rendered ridiculous. *Oyinbo* may be depicted carrying about a teacup or transistor radio, he may go about shaking hands and saying “How do you do?” in a nasalized accent, or he may have on a big wrist watch which he repeatedly looks at suggesting, amongst other things, a Western adherence to a strict concept of time. Generally speaking, *oyinbo* is almost always mimed with little or no dialogue.

In addition, *oyinbo*’s mask is designed to caricature physiological features commonly ascribed to white people:

In the Gbebolaja troupe, an adult always acting the *Oyinbo*, the impersonation becomes more detailed. The wooden mask is pink, with long narrow eyes with no eyelashes but with marked edges, and marked eyebrows. The forehead under the lank hair is small, but the nose is large and hooked. The mouth is long and narrow with no lips. Seen from a Yoruba point of view, this face is certainly not beautiful, but it is a good portrait!<sup>140</sup>

Of particular interest is the way *oyinbo* is socially represented. Ulli Beier describes a particular sketch in which a silly ballroom dance is performed<sup>141</sup> and Margaret Drewal describes another in which *oyinbo* chucks his wife’s cheek and then kisses her full on the lips. The idea of male and female partners dancing intimately together or showing public affection is strange in

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<sup>140</sup> Kacke Gotrick, *Apidan*, 93 – 94.

<sup>141</sup> Ulli Beier, “The Agbegijo Masqueraders,” *Nigerian Magazine*, 82(1964): 197.

Yoruba, and indeed many African cultures, and as such highlights a fundamental ideological difference in African and European concepts of sexuality and social interaction. Difference is further accentuated through miming and other forms of musico-linguistic representation as described by Gotrick:

In two of the four Oyinbo dramas that I saw, no attempt was made at characterizing by acting. According to Ajandele [sic], the master drummer of the Ayelabola troupe, this is deliberate. The Oyinbo's lack of movements, particularly of dance is to be understood as his inability to dance—the white man can only move about clumsily—in spite of the accompanying rhumba rhythm. This rhythm, called *Konga*, was demonstrated by Ajandele with the following jingle:

Gbedi gbedi konga

Tigbe tigbe tigbe gbe nbgen

The jingle has no lexical meaning, but suggests Western music.<sup>142</sup>

The second act of *Death and the King's Horseman* opens with Simon and Jane Pilkings “tangoing in and out of shadows” to the music of an old hand-cranked gramophone. They are wearing what, as yet, is only distinguishable as “some form of fancy-dress.” As the scene unfolds, we discover that they are in fact practicing for a masque to be held later the same night in honor of the British Prince, and that their chosen costumes are sacred *egungun* masks confiscated from ritual celebrants of the Alaafin's death a month ago. This brief mimed episode actually foreshadows the Prince's masque which opens act four. In this extended mimed scene, the opening music, “Rule Britannia,” is “badly” played by the local police band under the direction of their white conductor. Later, the Prince and other couples dance a much formalized Viennese waltz, the music of which is equally substandard. The entire sequence appears to cohere snugly with the redolence and “tawdry decadence of a far-flung but key imperial frontier” which is the set. The scene climaxes with the Pilkingses showing off their fancy *egungun* costumes as they mimic “the dance steps and guttural sounds made by the *egungun*.” Everyone is pleased, especially the “Royal Party” who “lead the applause.”

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<sup>142</sup> Kacke Gotrick, *Apidan*, 93 – 94.

The methods of characterization employed in the above-described scenes certainly evoke the satiric techniques of *alarinjo's oyinbo* sketches. It is not by mere coincidence that Soyinka chose to use music, masking and dance to enhance the contrasting sharpness of ideology between the Yoruba and the Europeans intended in the play. Martin Rohmer explores this idea when he discusses harmonies and juxtapositions in *Death and the King's Horseman*:

If we note that the communication of the Yoruba community is—at least in its unspoilt state—basically harmonious, complex, and technically elaborate, the opposite is true for the Europeans...The contrast between the third and fourth scenes is constructed in a parallel way, and here, Soyinka's characterization, scarcely the depiction of a healthy multicultural environment, makes a satirical comment on colonialist attitudes and the alienation of Western culture.<sup>143</sup>

In act one all the characters interact with one another using music and dance with the sense of organicism which mirrors the vibrant (albeit soon to be shattered) harmony of the Yoruba world. The scene ends with a marriage which symbolizes the communal continuity between the living, the dead and the unborn—Elesin is about to proceed to the world of the ancestors, but in a twilight wedding the parent stalk pours his sap into the young shoot so that the plantain may never dry.

It is still twilight when act two opens. But instead of real people, what confronts our senses are shadows dancing on the wall. The music is not live but cranked out by hand from an old gramophone. Compared to the supple movements and communal character of the dances from the previous scene, the European couple's Argentine tango is individualized and angular. Their costumes are aberrant within the context. Altogether it is not a wholesome picture. The playwright's designed alienation of the European is further articulated when later in the scene Simon and Jane can not decipher the meaning of the drums leaving them helplessly irritated.

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<sup>143</sup> Martin Rohmer, "Wole Soyinka's 'Death and the King's Horseman,' Royal Exchange Theater, Manchester" in *Death and the King's Horseman: Authoritative Text Backgrounds and Contexts Criticism*, ed. Simon Gikandi (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003), 132 – 134.

Similarly, act three contrasts the opening of act four. Again, music, but particularly dance, is the focus of this contrast. Dance definitely plays a big role in *Death and the King's Horseman* (almost every scene opens or closes with dance) of which Elesin's ritual dance in act three is of particular focus. Elesin performs his ritual dance, which is described as "solemn" and "regal." The women join in the dance, singing the dirge "*Ale le le awo mi lo*" with directed pathos, while the praise-singer chants high exhortations in synchrony with the event on hand. Just as in act one, everything is done with a sense of communality which heightens the efficacy of the ritual. By the end of the scene, so much emotion is generated that the praise-singer breaks down. The women's dirge "wells up louder and stronger" and Elesin sinks deeper into his trance. The music and dance which open act four are not born out of the same intensity of emotion witnessed in act three. Even though the music is live, it is a paltry image of its own self. The satire is accentuated when Pilkings and Jane, in *egungun* costumes, try to reenact movements and gestures associated with the event just witnessed in act three but end up ridiculing themselves. Irony reaches its peak in the response of the "Royal Party," who obviously derive genuine pleasure from a ridiculously shallow imitation.

In Soyinka's play, *oyinbo* does not need to put on a mask because he appears in his natural state. But all the attendant clumsiness and alienation of the *alarinjo* character are well articulated through music and dance. An added twist is thrown in by making Simon and Jane wear the masks of those who would normally satirize them. In so doing, Soyinka puts *oyinbo* in the position of the ridiculer, a golden chance, so to say, to prove the stereotypes about him wrong. But Jane and Simon are unable to put on a convincing performance. They simply reenact the stiffness of the *alarinjo* characters and thereby caricature themselves. Most significant, however, is the fact that the *alarinjo* philosophy of stranger and non-stranger categorization



comes through in the way scenes are made to follow one another. By juxtaposing scenes which illustrate the vibrant wholesomeness of Yoruba culture with scenes suggesting British colonial decadence and alienation, Soyinka creates a situation whereby Yoruba ethnic bonds are strengthened in the face of hostile political and cultural intrusion.

As shown at the beginning of this section, the juxtaposing of “stranger”/“non-stranger” human characters in *alarinjo* theater is a feature of the revue section of the performance. But it is not only the stylistic essence of *alarinjo* revue that is appropriated by Soyinka. If the mimed episode which opens act four can be described as stylistically resembling the *alarinjo* revue, act one even more so draws prodigiously from the *alarinjo* spectacle. June Balistreri describes the spectacle thus:

In contrast to the comic Alarinjo “revue”...the Alarinjo “spectacle” is very serious and dramatic. It provides a show-case for the masque-dramaturg’s virtuosity. Here, all of his creative talents are displayed when he is called upon to sing, dance, pantomime and even at times make a complete character transformation through a spectacular costume change in view of the audience. His performance is supported by the orchestra and chorus, providing the music and songs telling the mythological story acted on stage.<sup>144</sup>

In his exuberant vivacity and virtuosic performances Elesin is reflective of the masque-dramaturge of the *alarinjo* spectacle. The casting is deliberate. In an opening gesture designed to create a spectacular effect, Elesin enters “pursued by his drummers and praise singers.” We are immediately told that he “is a man of enormous vitality” who “speaks, dances and sings with that infectious enjoyment of life which accompanies all his actions.” This opening bravura is sustained throughout the scene, not only by Elesin, but by his drummers, praise-singers and the women of the market through their songs, chants and dances. In one particular instance, Praise-Singer, chanting in the poetic language of *oriki*, characterizes Elesin as,

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<sup>144</sup> June Clara Balistreri, “The Traditional Elements of the Yoruba Alarinjo Theater in Wole Soyinka’s Plays” (PhD diss., University of Colorado, 1978), 167.

...snake-on-the-loose in dark passages of the market! Bed-bug who wages war on the mat and receives the thanks of the vanquished...Warrior who never makes that excuse of the whining coward—but how can I go to battle without my trousers?—trouserless or shirtless it's all one to him....

To the above, the market women respond with resounding adulation, “*Ba-a-a-ba O!*” Elesin’s showmanship reaches an outstanding peak when he chants the story of the *Not-I bird*. However, unlike *alarinjo*’s chief dramaturge who makes a character transformation through a spectacular costume change in the view of the audience, Elesin’s character changes are numerous, realized each time through the dexterous modulation of his voice to mimic the characters in focus. The *Not-I bird* itself is both a totemistic as well as mythological character, types which in *alarinjo* theater feature exclusively in the spectacle. Other totemistic characters which feature in the tale are the hyena, the restless bird, and the civet. Admittedly, most of the characters in the story are human “stranger” and “non-stranger” types. However, what Elesin does here is to deconstruct the boundaries between characters in order to drive home the central idea of the tale which is the spinelessness of all living creatures in the face of death, that is, except himself. Death and fear are both personified in the figure of the *Not-I bird*, and we can thus argue that the overall character of the piece is totemistic.

Death came calling.  
Who does not know his rasp of reed?  
A twilight whisper in the leaves before  
The great araba falls? Did you hear it?  
Not I! swears the farmer. He snaps  
His fingers round his head, abandons  
A hard-worn harvest and begins  
A rapid dialogue with his legs

Regardless of how the song of the *Not-I bird* is classified, it achieves its purpose which, like the chief dramaturge’s repertoire, is to show-case the performer. It is that wary measure of self-pride which is characteristic of many virtuosos that Elesin displays when in response to Iyaloja’s query about his preparedness in the face of his coming ritual suicide he states:

I, when that Not-I bird perched  
Upon my roof, bade him seek his nest again,  
Safe, without care of fear. I unrolled  
My welcome mat for him to see....  
My rein is loosened.  
I am the master of my Fate. When the hour comes  
Watch me dance along the narrowing path  
Glazed by the soles of my great precursors.  
My soul is eager. I shall not turn aside.

### 3.2.3. Music and Mood

But Elesin turns aside, and regardless of what interpretation we give to his action, the last scene in which Elesin, on discovering his son Olunde's dead body, strangles himself with the chains of his incarceration is certainly very moving. Having explored the use of music in plot and characterization we might already begin to get a sense of how the two work together in creating the mood of the play.

The underlying ritual theme, continuously driven by music, poetry and dance, leads up to Elesin's trance at the end of act three, the intensity of which only heightens the catharsis generated by the tragic turn of events in the last two acts. Olunde's self sacrifice at the end of the play exudes a *martyric* pathos borne on the plaintive strains of the swaying women's dirge which soars and ebbs intermittently in accommodation of the praise-singer who, now possessed, speaks poetic exhortations with the voice of the dead *Alaafin*:

Elesin Oba!....Remember when I said, if you cannot come, tell my horse....There lies the swiftest ever messenger of a king, so set me free with the errand of your heart. There lies the head and heart of the favourite of the gods, whisper in his ears. Oh my companion, if you had followed when it was time, we would not say the horse preceded its rider."

The scene is reminiscent of the trance sequence of act three in its choric essence and charged spirituality, but it turns out that the solemn ecstasy of Elesin's trance was a shortchanged climax which duly degenerates into the pulsing lament of the final scene. For failing in his communal duty, a duty to which his lustfulness in act one has doubly obliged him: "I warned you, if you must leave seed behind, be sure it is not tainted with the curses of the world..." Iyaloja

discharges a generous measure of the more than appropriate scolding which Elesin deserves. It is only when Elesin discovers that Olunde, his first born son and heir to his legacy, has proven the father in performing what should have been the highest obligation of the chief horseman's office, that it dawns on him that in the community to which he is morally and spiritually accountable, all have made sacrifices except he who was called on in the first place. In Yoruba culture, it is not parents who should bury their children, but children their parents, and the fact that Elesin has survived his son is already mentally torturous. But to think that it was in his stead that Olunde died is too much for Elesin, and in a last redemptive effort he strangles himself with his chains of incarceration, rushing swiftly to his death. The action is too late. Elesin has finally entered the passage, but "His son will feast on the meat and throw him bones." Not surprisingly, "the WOMEN continue their dirge, unmoved by the sudden event."

*Ale le o o, Awo mi lo*  
*Ale le o o, awo mi lo o*  
*Ale le o o, awo mi re'le*

English: Night falls, My comrade (seasoned initiate) goes home.

It is the same dirge from the third act which was supposed to urge Elesin on into the world of the ancestors, but now the song of the father has become that of the son. Still we cannot be totally insensitive to the tragedy of Elesin. He may no longer be *the seasoned initiate*, but when it comes to the broader boundaries defining belonging and alienation, Elesin is still *awo* i.e. comrade, only one who has fallen from grace. Hence, when Pilkings tries to close Elesin's "staring eyes," Iyaloja's reaction is swift and impassioned:

Let him alone! However sunk he was in debt he is no pauper's carrion abandoned on the road. Since when have strangers donned clothes of indigo before the bereaved cries out his loss?

His young bride then proceeds to fulfill her rightful duty, she closes his eyes and puts some earth over them. And although Iyaloja tells her to forget the dead and the living, and focus only on the

unborn, it is Elesin whom our senses are compelled to focus on as Iyaloja and the young bride go off. At a distance far or near, Olunde's body also lies dead, reminding us that the father has become the shadow of the son. We soon realize that we are ourselves engulfed by the ethereal sounds of the modal dirge as it soars into the acoustic space of the theater. But indeed, the sound of the swaying mourning women was always there, all the while under-girding the tragic essence of the actions on stage; in act three, when it gave wing to Elesin's flight into transition, and in the close of the play dually symbolizing the death of the favored of the gods and the failed horseman.

In unifying the two most ritualistic scenes in the play through the dirge and its attendant mimetic realization, Soyinka amplifies the overriding mood of the play, that which he calls its "threnodic essence." What we must now address is whether this application of music, poetry and dance to enhance tragic mood is indicative of Yoruba tradition, and the answer to this question must of compulsion be affirmative. For validation of this claim, we may first turn to that pioneer Yoruba historian, Samuel Johnson, through whose efforts we have a general description of the scenario Soyinka appropriates from traditional Yoruba life:

Of the members of the royal family and others to die were....Two titled personages not of royal blood viz., the Osi'wefa and the Olokun-esin (master of the horse) who is generally styled "Ab'obaku," i.e. one who is to die with the King.  
...The custom is that each should go and die in his (or her) own home, and among his family. The spectacle is very affecting. Dressed in their "death cloth," they issue from the palace to their homes surrounded by their friends, and their drummers beating funeral dirges, eager crowds of friends and acquaintances flocking around them, pressing to have a last look at them or to say the final farewell as they march homewards. The house is full of visitors, mourners and others, some in profuse tears; mournful wailings and funeral odes are heard on all sides enough to break the stoutest heart.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate*, (Lagos, Nigeria: C.S.S. Bookshop, 1976), 55 – 56.

Apart from the fact that Elesin has uncharacteristically chosen the market<sup>146</sup> as his “roost,” Soyinka creates a scenario that conspicuously parallels the one described by Johnson. Friends, drummers, an eager crowd of market women all flock around Elesin. The dirges and the “profuse tears” characteristic of such an event are not as pronounced but they are not altogether absent in this scene. It is Elesin Oba himself who is not yet ready to be occupied with thoughts of death for the material things he yet seeks, and so he shrewdly deflects all mournful suggestions. Hence, when the Praise-Singer brings up the import of the soon to begin ritual, Elesin breaks the lyrical stride of Praise-Singer, replacing his exhortation with the trivial tale of the Not-I bird:

PRAISE-SINGER: There is only one home to the life of a river-mussel; there is  
only one home to the life of a tortoise; there is only one shell to the soul of  
man; there is only one world to the spirit of our race. If that world leaves  
its course and smashes on boulders of the great void, whose world will give  
us shelter?

ELESIN: It did not in the time of my forebears, it shall not in mine.

PRAISE-SINGER: The cockerel must not be seen without his feathers.

ELESIN: Nor will the Not-I bird be much longer without his nest.

By the middle of act three, however, Elesin, having satisfied his fleshly desires, emerges from his bridal chamber poised for the journey of transition. The ritual dance begins.

*He comes down progressively among them. They make way for him, the DRUMMERS playing. His dance is one of solemn, regal motions, each gesture of the body is made with a solemn finality. The women join him, their steps a more fluid version of his. Beneath the PRAISE-SINGER's exhortations, the women dirge 'Ale le le, awo mi lo'*

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<sup>146</sup> In Yoruba culture, there is a cosmological symbolism attached to Market as evident in the saying, *Aye l'oja, orun n'ile* (the world is market, heaven is home). Market for the Yoruba signifies transition, since the earth is the middle area between the unborn and deceased state. It is therefore due to symbolic reasons related to the ritual theme of his play that he makes act one take place in the market.

In this scene, already described in the foregoing, is the full realization of what Johnson calls an affecting spectacle. As Elesin's trance deepens, Iyaloja delivers a moving ode derived from Yoruba traditional repertoire:

**Transliterations from Soyinka's script**

**Original Yoruba proverbs**

It is the death of war that kills the valiant,

*Iku ogun ni i pa akikanju*

Death of water is how the swimmer goes

*Iku odo ni i pa omuwe*

It is the death of markets that kills the trader<sup>147</sup>

And death of indecision takes the idle away

*Majamasa ni i pa onitiju*

The trade of the cutlass blunts its edge

*Owo ti ada ba mo ni ika ada*

*l'ehin*

And the beautiful die the death of beauty

*Iku ara rire ni i pa arewa*

It takes an Elesin to die the death of death...

Only Elesin...dies the unknowable death of death...

Gracefully, gracefully does the horseman regain

The stables at the end of the day, gracefully....

As stated already (see analysis of music and plot: *Act 3, episode 2: contextual possibilities*), the dirge, which all the while continues to be sung by the women, is a well known Yoruba traditional dirge which has been rendered in its variants during different performances of the play. As Elesin dances deeper into his trance and nears the hour of his departure, the "*dirge wells up louder and louder*," heightening the elegiac ecstasy. Somewhere on the path to this rapture, the praise-singer, himself the most dolorous tongue laced with funeral odes, becomes so emotion laden that he appears to "break down." The event, extremely moving in its entirety is, as Johnson says, "enough to break the stoutest heart."

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<sup>147</sup> Obviously, Soyinka takes the license to insert this line, his own invention perhaps, because of the significance of "market" in Yoruba culture and its symbolism in the play. Symbolically, this scene takes place in the market place, and the recitalist, Iyaloja, is the market "head."

### 3.2.4. Music and the Communal Aesthetic

Discussing concepts of neo-African music as manifested in Yoruba folk opera, Akin Euba states that:

In African traditional culture, the relevance of music, or to put it another way, the function of music in society has always been an important factor and is, consequently, one that is also desirable in modern culture. We cannot, then, lightly dismiss the question of relevance of modern African music to contemporary African society<sup>148</sup>

One might elaborate on Euba's statement by saying that music in Yoruba culture is socially ineffective without situating it within an appropriate functional aspect of culture such as religion, politics, festival or other instituted social practice. However, to leave the matter as such prescribes an oversimplified stance which necessarily relegates all Yoruba music to a perceived utilitarian role. This, to my knowledge, is neither the case, nor is it what Euba suggests. Nzewi, for example makes distinctions between utilitarian and entertainment or "pure" forms of performing arts in Nigeria,<sup>149</sup> and this is a view which is endorsed by several scholars, African and otherwise. The salient point being addressed by Euba then is that in the event of transference of an essential aspect of traditional musical practice into modern music making, the creative artist must consider the need of the audience to be able to self-identify with the music, this, regardless of the varied stylistic nuances accumulated along the ever rejuvenating path of inventiveness. It is this need for self-identification in Yoruba artistic expressive-consumptive dialogue which I term the *communal aesthetic*. Self-identification is thus defined in this context in terms of communality.

Whether with regard to traditional or modern, utilitarian or entertainment milieus, the Yoruba audience expects to find in the artist's creation recognizable elements such as will enable

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<sup>148</sup> Akin Euba, "Concepts of Neo-African Music as Manifested in the Yoruba Folk Opera," in *The African Diaspora*, ed. Monson Ingrid (New York: Garland, 2002), 207 – 241.

<sup>149</sup> Meki Nzewi, "Music, Dance, Drama and the Stage in Nigeria," in *Drama and Theater in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*, 434.



them to participate either actively as co-performers, or through less obvious consensual gestures of approval. The idea of leader-respondent reciprocity within creatively determined boundaries is conveyed in the Yoruba saying, *won ni won o fe e n'ilu, oo n d'arin; t'o ba darin ti won o ba gbe nko?* (they have said they don't want you in town, yet you raise a song; how can you perform without a chorus?). The Yoruba creative artist is strongly aware of his audience's need for self-identification; he is himself acutely yearning for their approval as a means of consolidating the relevance of his art and by extension himself within society. He therefore constantly seeks ways by which he can cater to these needs. This, however, does not limit the creative license of the artist as may be imagined. In Yoruba aesthetics, the principle of *gestalt* is always at work. Creativity, then, does not exist in the invention of new forms which must necessarily obliterate the old. Rather, creativity is expressed through a framework of newness which is simultaneously inventive and accommodating of the old familiar tropes and structures of tradition. Of course, this capacity for accommodation within inventiveness is based on mutual relevance, the effectiveness of which is ratified by the audience who, invariably, are the critics of Yoruba arts:

The audiences are guardians of culture. Oral tradition should be used to reflect traditional sensibility and induce mass appeal. The wrong use of oral tradition may therefore disturb the audience and threaten its most cherished sentiments. But the modern artist allows his sensibility to be acted upon by modern experience. Oral tradition is employed by the practitioners of the contemporary Nigerian theater as a principle of continuity.<sup>150</sup>

The above theory is clearly illustrated in the content organization of traditional performance genres such as the *iwi* chants of the *egungun* guild. Discussing the compositional and performance techniques of *iwi egungun* chants, Oludare Olajubu describes three distinct sections: *iba* (homage and salutations to the powers that be, including the chanter himself); *oriki* (salutes to individuals)/*orile* (salutes to lineages); and, closing chants and songs. Each of these

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<sup>150</sup> Joel Adedeji, "Oral Tradition and the Contemporary Theater in Nigeria," *Research in African Literatures* 2 (1971): 147.

parts, he states, must be synchronized by the *iwi* artist “to produce a distinct form of oral poetry.”<sup>151</sup> The *oriki* and *orile* constitute “the largest and most important part of *iwi*.” Their contents are known to both artist and audience, and they are regarded by all as the “real chant.” As such, all non-prescribed alterations to an *oriki* or *orile* are considered signs of ineptitude on the part of the chanter for which the audience promptly shows disapproval. Within this ostensibly fixed structure, however, the *iwi* artist is expected to punctuate successive recitations of *oriki/orile* with another set of items which address a wide range of subjects. These include prayers, proverb, fables, incantations, witty sayings, jokes and songs which afford the *iwi* chanter the space for personal artistic creativity and social commentary. Personal artistry is also showcased in the vocal dexterity of the *iwi* chanter who chants in a high-pitched voice approaching a speech-song style. For these reasons, Olajubu concludes, “no artist can repeat verbatim a chant he has chanted before. Every performance yields a new poem, created on the spur of the moment to satisfy a new audience and a new situation.”<sup>152</sup>

Just as in traditional music, the need to communicate is realized in Yoruba popular music through troping. In genres like *juju*, *fuji* and *waka*, Yoruba popular musicians interpolate traditional Yoruba melodies, proverbs, folk tales as well fragments from Western popular songs in a manner akin to sampling in American hip-hop. This is a reflection of artists’ efforts to reach their predominantly Nigerian audience who are themselves products of the multicultural environment typical of many modern African societies.

Yoruba composers of art music have also expressed the need to communicate with an African audience through their compositions. The organ and orchestral works of that acclaimed Yoruba composer, Fela Sowande, for example, exhibit a copious use of traditional and popular

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<sup>151</sup> Oludare Olajubu, “Iwi Egungun Chants – An Introduction” in *Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Literatures*, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Three Continents Press; Washington, D.C, 1976), 7 -8.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

Yoruba (and African) melodies and rhythms the purpose of which is to generate a communal sense of cultural identity. Reflecting on his days as choirmaster and organist of the West London Mission of the Methodist Church, Sowande states:

...Now, in that church the organ was placed so that my back was to the auditorium, with a curtain around it, but I could see the congregation through a mirror above the organ console. Now, when I was practicing and I thought I had a good idea, I used to wait until I knew there were Africans in the church. As I played the music, I would watch them closely to see what their reaction was. If they kept walking out I knew I was not getting to them. But if I was able to communicate my ideas to them, they would sit down and I would say O.K I got them...I have to communicate, otherwise I feel I am doing nothing. If those who listen to my music cannot hear what I am saying...to me it's a share waste of time.<sup>153</sup>

In fact, one might make a broad assertion that the African art music movement was born out of a need to communicate preceded by the alienation African composers trained in the Western European style felt from their African audiences who were unable to identify with their compositions. As “audience” is the ultimate critic in many African traditions, these composers have found it imperative to saturate their music with those elements from traditional music which will enable them communicate with their fellow Africans, whether these be motivic or structural features drawn from the oral repertoire. In Akin Euba’s opera *Chaka*, this process is skillfully realized in a manner very identical to the traditional *iwi* performance described above. Euba describes the creative processes he employed in achieving this modern appropriation of Yoruba musical practices:

...one of the roles in the opera is that of a Yoruba traditional chanter, performing praise poetry in Yoruba for Chaka. Incidentally, much of the text of the praise poetry is based on drum texts played for two deceased Yoruba Kings, which I collected in the course of my doctoral research. The responsorial song used by the chanter is based on that composed by a professional *rara* chanter...who played the role in the 1970 production. The responsorial songs used in the context of Noliwe’s part are from the *ijala* chants of Yoruba hunters, devotees of Ogun, the Yoruba god of war and iron objects.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Eileen Southern, “Interview with Fela Sowande, the High Priest of Music,” in *The Black Perspective in Music* 4/1 (1976): 97 – 98.

<sup>154</sup> Akin Euba, *Chaka: An Opera in Two Chants*, performed by the City of Birmingham Touring Opera, Music Research Institute, Richmond, CA, Compact disc.

It is the consistency of this overriding need to “speak through music” regardless of form or style that makes communality an underlying aesthetic principle in Yoruba music. The communal aesthetic is no less employed by the school of literary playwrights to which Wole Soyinka belongs. Abiola Irele declares:

Our writers are recognizably African only in the sense in which they give an African character to their works and conversely, we who are Africans, will only accept them as speaking about us and for us in so far as they take our voice and speak with our accent.<sup>155</sup>

The previous discussions on the use of music for plot projection, characterization and mood already reveal a copious employment of the elements of Yoruba traditional music and related arts in *Horseman*. It has already been shown how the songs, chants and dances, and dramatization techniques used by Soyinka are either drawn directly or adapted from Yoruba traditional repertoire. These borrowings do not only function in the expansion of the modern dramatic framework which serves as the primary medium for Soyinka’s play, they also infuse *Horseman* with a sense of “Yorubanness” which has been acknowledged and appreciated by audiences, Yoruba and non-Yoruba alike. Bimpe Aboyade, for example, commenting on the 1979 winter performance of *Horseman* directed by the playwright himself for the J.F Kennedy Center, Washington D.C, describes her experience thus:

There we were, on a cold winter’s night, thousands of miles away and within the nerve center of an alien culture, transformed into a complete reunion, albeit briefly, with our kith and kin in the ancient city of Oyo. We were in ‘refined’ American and international company, but we were also in the company of drummers and praise-singers, traditional chiefs and market women...”<sup>156</sup>

Needless to say, *Horseman* functions effectively within the aesthetic framework of communality which has so far been discussed. While songs, dances, poetry and stylistic nuances

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<sup>155</sup> Abiola Irele, “The Criticism of Modern African Literature,” in *Perspectives on African Literature*, ed. Christopher Heywood (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1971), 15.

<sup>156</sup> Bimpe Aboyade, *Wole Soyinka and Yoruba Oral Tradition in Death and the King’s Horseman* (Fountain Publications: Ibadan, Nigeria, 1994), 132 – 146.

play a significant role in achieving this aesthetic, perhaps the most arresting artistic borrowing in the play is language. I have already discussed the musicality of the Yoruba language and the fluidity of linguistic registers and formulae which enable the entire breath of Yoruba verbal expressions function within an artistic framework.<sup>157</sup> Whether in the stylized poetic utterances of the Praise-Singer and Elesin, or the more naturalistic conversational style of Iyaloja and the market women, the Yoruba linguistic idiom is successfully transposed into *Horseman*. The mark of this transposition is the prodigious insertion into the play's dialogue of linguistic formulae: proverbs, puns, witty sayings and metaphors which are directly taken from Yoruba speech. Indeed, Aboyade is right on the mark when she states that "In its measured utterances the play belongs in the same tradition as *esa* [*iwi*] the poetry of *egungun*, *ijala* the poetry of the hunters, and *rara* the poetry of the talking drum."<sup>158</sup>

Following are some Yoruba proverbs and their transliterations and adaptations as used in *Horseman*:<sup>159</sup>

Praise Singer:

*Ariyawo-ko-iyale*

Because the man approaches a brand-new bride he forgets the  
long faithful mother of his children.

*Iku ogun ni i pa akikanju, iku odo ni i pa omuwe, iku ara rire ni i pa arewa, iku odo ni i pa omuwe, majamasa ni i pa onitiju, owo ti ada ba mo ni ika ada l'ehin,*

It is the death of war that kills the valiant,

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<sup>157</sup> See Chapter 2, "The Language of the Yoruba."

<sup>158</sup> Bimpe Aboyade, *Wole Soyinka and Yoruba Oral Tradition in Death and the King's Horseman* (Fountain Publications: Ibadan, Nigeria, 1994), 10.

<sup>159</sup> These proverbs are cited from David Richards, "Masks of Language," in *Death and the King's Horseman: Authoritative Text Backgrounds and Contexts Criticism*, ed. Simon Gikandi (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003), 196 – 207.

Death of water is how the swimmer goes

It is the death of markets that kills the trader

And death of indecision takes the idle away

The trade of the cutlass blunts its edge

And the beautiful die the death of beauty

*It takes an Elesin to die the death of death...*

*Only Elesin...dies the unknowable death of death...*

*Gracefully, gracefully does the horseman regain*

*The stables at the end of the day, gracefully....*

Elesin:

*Ibi ti o wu efufu lele ni i dari igbe si, ibi ti o wu olowo eni ni ran ni lo*

Where the storm pleases, and when, it directs

The giants in the forest.

*Agba t'o je aje-i-wehin ni yio ru igba re de le*

What elder takes his tongue to his plate,

Licks it clean of every crumb? He will encounter

Silence when he calls on children to fulfill

The smallest errand!

*Awodi to'o nre Ibara, efufu ta a n'idi pa o ni Ise kuku ya*

The Kite makes for wide spaces and the wind creeps up be-

hind its tail; can the kite say less than—thank you, the

quicker the better?

*Ajanaku ko l'ekan, oba ti yio mu erin so ko i je.*

The elephant

Trails no tethering-rope; that king

Is not yet crowned who will peg an elephant.

*Ajanaku kuro ni 'mo ri nkan firi,' bi a ba ri erin ki a ni a ri erin*

Better than that we say 'I have caught

A glimpse of something.' If we see the tamer

Of the forest let us say plainly, we have seen an elephant.

*Odo ki i kun bo eja l'oju*

The river is never so high that the eyes

Of a fish are covered.

*Orule bo aja mole, aso bo ese idi, awo fere bo inu ko je ki a ri iku aseni*

We know the roof covers the rafters, the cloth covers the blemishes; who would have known that *the white skin covered our future*, preventing us from seeing the death our enemies had prepared for us.

Iyaloja:

*Ati je asala (Awusa) ko to ati mu omi si i*

Eating the awusa nut is not so difficult as drinking water afterwards.

*A ki i ru eran erin l'ori ki a maa f'ese wa s'ire n'ile*

We said you were the hunter returning home in triumph, a slain buffalo pressing down on his neck; you said wait, I first must turn up this cricket hole with my toes.

*Ohun ti a ki i je a ki ifi run imu*

Whatever we have no intention of eating should not be held to  
the nose.

*Odo ti o t'oju eni kun ki igbe 'ni lo*

The river which fills up before our eyes does not sweep us  
away in its flood.

*Okete fi ija sehin o de oja o wa kawo l'eri, 'e jowo, e gba mi o,' ko ye egungun; eran ni o nle mi  
bo, ko ye ode*

The bush-rat fled his rightful cause, reached the market and set up a lamentation. 'Please  
save me!'—are these fitting words to hear from an ancestral mask? 'There is a wild beast  
at my heels' is not becoming language for a hunter.

*Bi a ko ba ri adan a fi oode sebo*

If there is a dearth of bats, the pigeon must serve us for the offering.



#### 4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the foregoing, I have attempted to show the roots of modern Yoruba drama in traditional practices. In particular, I have focused on Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. My analysis has been based on the ideas proffered by fellow Nigerian creative artist and scholar, Meki Nzewi, wherein a traditional paradigm is presented as the basis of defining the ideal roles of music and dance in modern Nigerian theater. To this end, it has been important to survey the nature of traditional music among the Yoruba in order to contextualize its uses in the modern theater. The multiartistic nature of Yoruba theater has been discussed as naturally deriving from a culture in which music, dance, and other forms of oral and plastic arts feature intrinsically in the realization of day to day life. By and large, this thesis demonstrates Nzewi's assertion that "music and dance" in modern theater "should be synthesized and symbiotic factors conceived for projecting and propelling the plot, or used to sustain dramatic action, or to enhance the dramatic presence of an actor, location, or to evoke a psychological moment..." In addition, where the relevance of theatrical works has been defined by the adherence of the creative artist to an aesthetic in which the audience perceives a communal sense of cultural identity, *Horseman* successfully conveys "the artistic-aesthetic characteristics of the music and dance of the human environment and the socio-cultural sensibilities prescribed by the theme, plot and script..."<sup>160</sup>

The incorporation of modern elements derived from Western culture into Yoruba theater mirrors the very real phenomenon of cultural plurality in which Yoruba and most African

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<sup>160</sup> Meki Nzewi, "Music, Dance, Drama and the Stage in Nigeria," in *Drama and Theater in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*, ed. Yemi Ogunbiyi (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981), 455.

societies necessarily negotiate their daily existences. In this light, the continued presence of traditional practices, whether as self-contained modes of expression existing alongside newer forms, or as definitive elements within modern genres such as popular and literary theater, may be construed as presenting a cultural grounding within the flux of external influences and the threat to self-identity implicit therein. Put differently, the continued appropriation of “tradition” in the face of looming erosion under modernity, which unfortunately appears to have a penchant for courting hostile interventions such as colonialism and Western global hegemony, is a conscious expression of cultural self-apprehension.

What is considered as “authentic” Yoruba culture is in itself very progressive in nature. This is an assertion which runs against the sometime popular grain of thought that indigenous cultures are monolithic, resistant to, indeed incapable of assimilating change. The *Ifa* literary corpus, a sort of Yoruba “Holy Book,” which has been passed down through oral tradition for countless generations, contains verses on Islam and Christianity, religions which were only comparatively recently introduced to the Yoruba. It is significant that such a sacred corpus of divination poetry to which the traditional Yoruba look for direction and guidance in all matters of life is constantly being updated to accommodate the wisdom born of situations previously not encountered, and therefore not addressed by its philosophers. In this vein, the *Ifa* literary corpus prescribes for its adherents a continually expanding and accommodating world view. Under normal mutual circumstances, Yoruba indigenous culture does not consider external influence a threat because it rests on a liberal ideology which, rather than excludes, incorporates and appropriates. But even in hostile circumstances where, as Soyinka states, culture is a decided

“target of assault by an invading force,”<sup>161</sup> where indigenous culture has indeed been brought under hostile suffusion by the upper hand of, say colonization or enslavement, the Yoruba have reacted, not with agitated insecurity, but with calm, contemplative reasoning, seeking relevance, similarities and points of confluence between the invading culture and theirs. Having found these similarities, they then proceed to reclaim, that is, apprehend their own identity through processes of appropriation such as I have discussed in this thesis. In the modern Yoruba world, therefore, *Sango*, the god of lightning, becomes the national icon of electricity, *Ogun*, god of iron, becomes the patron of motor mechanics and bus drivers, *Moremi*, a female deity who when on earth sacrificed her only son to discover the secret which secured *Ife*’s victory over their perpetually warring *Igbo* neighbor, becomes the virgin Mary, and her son *Oluorogbo*, who was taken up to heaven and deified after death, becomes Jesus Christ. Such Yoruba tenacity is known to defy transcontinental boundaries as evident in the many Yoruba practices which remain vibrant in the new world such as Candomble and Umbanda in Brazil, Santeria in Cuba and the United States, and Voodoo in Haiti and the United States. Yoruba creative artists have also exhibited a strong will in this regard as evident in the high indigenous content of their “modern” plays. It might seem a romantic suggestion now, but the thought is not really all that farfetched: that where in the past communities have gathered at the market square or compound patio to learn culture through indigenous theatrical performances, a contemporary equivalent will emerge within modern performance spaces.

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<sup>161</sup> Wole Soyinka, “Theater in Traditional Cultures: Survival Patterns,” in *Death and the King’s Horseman: Authoritative Text Backgrounds and Contexts Criticism*, ed. Simon Gikandi (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003), 89.

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