

Université de Montréal

**Linguistic Imperialism: A Study of Language and Yoruba Rituals
in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman***

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Mémoire présenté à la Faculté des arts et des sciences

en vue de l'obtention du grade de maîtrise

en Études anglaises

option avec mémoire

Août, 2015

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Résumé

L'objectif de ce mémoire est de démontrer le rôle important de la langue dans la pièce de théâtre *Death and the King's Horseman* par l'auteur nigérian Wole Soyinka. Le premier chapitre traite les implications de l'écriture d'un texte postcolonial dans la langue anglaise et revisite les débats linguistiques des années 1950 et 1960. En plus de l'anglais, ce mémoire observe l'utilisation d'autres formes de communication telles que l'anglais, le pidgin nigérian, les dialectes locaux et les métaphores Yoruba. Par conséquent, l'intersection entre la langue et la culture devient évidente à travers la description des rituels. La dernière partie de ce mémoire explore l'objectif principal de Soyinka de créer une «essence thrénodique». Avec l'utilisation de masques rituels, de la danse et de la musique, il développe un type de dialogue qui dépasse les limites de la forme écrite et est accessible seulement à ceux qui sont équipés de sensibilités culturelles Yoruba.

Mots-clés : Soyinka, langue, l'anglais, rituel, chanson, danse, tambours, chant funèbre

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate the significant role of language in the development of the play *Death and King's Horseman* by Nigerian author Wole Soyinka. The first chapter discusses the implications of writing a postcolonial text in the English language and revisits the language debates of the 1950s and 1960s. In addition to English, the thesis observes the use of other forms of communication such as Nigerian Pidgin English, local dialects, and Yoruba metaphors. Consequently, the intersection between language and culture becomes apparent through the description of the rituals. The final section of the thesis explores Soyinka's primary focus of creating a "threnodic essence." With the use of ritual masks, dance and music, he develops a type of dialogue that transcends the written form and is accessible only to those who are equipped with Yoruba cultural sensibilities.

Keywords: Soyinka, language, English, ritual, song, dance, drums, threnody.

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Introduction

The plays of Wole Soyinka are a revelation of the way in which theater can reach into the heart of a community and make vital, amusing and distressing discoveries about its ordeals and its capacities for life.

(Philip Brockbank, "Tragic Ritual from Aeschylus to Soyinka")

Achebe's language is just as uncompromising as Soyinka's. Poet and novelist rely so heavily on the Anglo-Saxon roots of the English language because they are determined to get to the roots of the African psyche.

(Stanley Macebuh, "Poetics and the Mythic Imagination")

As one of Nigeria's most illustrious writers, Wole Soyinka's body of literature has garnered much critical attention from readers both inside and outside the country. His most celebrated work is undoubtedly *Death and the King's Horseman*, a play chronicling the last days of Elesin Oba's life. As the horseman to the recently departed king, Elesin must perform his final and most important task for his monarch by undergoing a ritual suicide. Forming the metaphysical basis of the Yoruba world, the ritual suicide allows the horseman to follow his leader into the afterworld and to protect the sovereign in the next realm. However, the story is complicated by the arrival of Simon Pilkings, a British district officer arriving in Oyo as part of the imperial project of colonial expansion. When Pilkings restrains Elesin from completing the ritual suicide, the horseman's son Olunde steps up to fill in for his father. The young man commits suicide and many residents of the town appear satisfied to know that a new leader has come forward to protect the spirit of the dead king in the afterworld. Elesin then falls out of favor and is humiliated and ostracized by his neighbors who depended on him to keep the

peace between the different factions of Yoruba life. Elesin, now a disgraced outcast, finds that there is no other alternative for him but to kill himself without the posthumous honors of the king's horseman.

Death and the King's Horseman's mass critical appeal saw it travel from African theaters to international platforms. Upon its arrival on Western stages, the play exhibited interpretive challenges when trying to adapt it for a foreign audience. Martin Rohmer explains,

For Western directors, the staging of the play causes problems on a formal as well as thematic level, the main obstacle being the dramaturgical importance of music and dance as the two other basic means, apart from verbal dialogue, of communication in African culture. These three elements in fact constitute the fundamental pattern of communication throughout the play, and its success or failure in production will mainly depend on how the interrelation of each of these stylistic devices to one another is established. (121)

Rohmer's statement hones in on the different systems of communication that Soyinka utilizes in his work.¹ Not only does language serve as a means of correspondence but music and dance become important forms of expression as well. This reality underscores the multifaceted nature of language in the play and how it transcends the speech form. The dramaturgical

¹ *Death and the King's Horseman's* first international production was in Chicago in 1976 and later in Washington D.C as well as New York. Simon Gikandi states, "Soyinka's production of the play at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago was described as a unique stage experience, one that changed the rules of performance on the Western stage" (xv). An expert in theatre direction himself, Soyinka was heavily involved in the staging of his play. The playwright fine-tuned every aspect of his play and was very diligent about perfecting every stylistic detail. Gikandi adds, "while the play was greeted with acclaim in Nigeria, reviews of the play in Chicago and Washington D.C., were not only mixed, but often the source of verbal duels between theatre critics for major American newspapers and Soyinka and his supporters" (xv). The presentation of the *Death and the King's Horseman* in America highlighted the controversies surrounding the complex language of the play.

implications of Soyinka's play requires that audiences become familiar with a type of engagement that steps out of the normative conventions of language.

In the play, ritual quickly emerges as one of the primary frameworks of Yoruba ideology. As part of the social order of the community, Elesin is entrusted with the responsibility of carrying ritual beliefs from the world of the living to the world of the dead. With the arrival of Simon Pilkings, *Death and the King's Horseman* acquires a colonial element that complicates the narrative. Consequently, many readers impulsively gravitated towards a reading that supposes a collision between colonizers and colonized, a type of reading that Soyinka insists on avoiding. Instead, the playwright seeks to highlight parts of the Yoruba universe that are less concerned with the presence of the British imperialist. In the Introduction to the Norton Critical Edition of the play, Simon Gikandi explains, "[l]ike other writers in this tradition, Soyinka's literary career was defined by the tension between the desire to account for African worlds and experiences at the end of colonial rule, using the language and literature models borrowed from the departing colonizer" (x). The ways in which Soyinka chooses to incorporate the influences of the colonizer are very deliberate and methodical. Always concerned with the "larger questions of being and experience" (Gikandi x) in Africa, Soyinka continuously strives to fashion representations that depict African realities. Gikandi then states, "[w]hat perhaps distinguishes Soyinka from other African writers of his generation, many of whom are focused on the problems of contemporary life, is his attempt to use language to go beyond the visible, everyday world" (xi). Gikandi's last assertion lays the foundation for my thesis, which examines the myriad ways Soyinka utilizes language to narrate the tale of a society undergoing a profound change. Despite Soyinka's

many attempts to dissuade a reading based on a “clash of cultures” (*DKH 5*), the significance of the colonizer’s presence becomes undeniable when studying the ways Soyinka uses English.

Not only does Soyinka display changing attitudes in his characters, but he also presents instances that challenge a semantic reading of his text. Soyinka attributes many responsibilities to his readers. For Soyinka, the reader becomes “would-be producer” (*DKH 5*) and adopts an active role of creating meaning to the text. As an architect of meaning, the audience adopts a new position, one that requires a responsible engagement with the play. Indeed, this responsibility is linked to the reader’s capacity for interpretation. That is, as a reader, and (according to Soyinka) as a producer, subjects who engage with the text are invited to participate in the creation of meaning. Hence, for readers, language becomes a crucial tool in helping to achieve this role.

It is nearly impossible to read Soyinka’s drama without acknowledging the similarities to Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. In this tale, the protagonist Okonkwo is also anointed as the leader of his community and expected to uphold the values of his people. After a series of failures,² “the people gather to decide what to do after the humiliation of their elders, including Okonkwo...messengers from ‘the white man’s court’ arrive to stop the assembly” (Ifowodo 46-7). Similar to *Death and the King’s Horseman*, Achebe’s drama unfolds as a result of community leaders not able to sustain the traditions of their society. At the end of the

² In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo commits dishonorable acts by killing one of the District Commissioner’s men. He also breaks the Week of Peace by beating his youngest wife for believing she has been dishonest. These actions go against his people’s beliefs which ultimately makes him realize that he has no other option but to sever ties to his clan by committing suicide. Similarly, in *Death and the King’s Horseman*, Elesin Oba’s failure to complete the ritual sacrifice also sees him become a damned character. He too takes his own life in an attempt to remove himself from his community.

novel, Okonkwo believes that there is no other alternative for him but to kill himself, an act that is deemed unholy in his Igbo community. Although Elesin and Okonkwo's tragic destinies result in shameful deaths, both characters present a shift in ideology, that is, they introduce the possibility that that aspect of their community's beliefs no longer supports the realities of the present. This form of tragedy focuses on the situations that represent an evolving Africa, one that acknowledges the presence of the colonizers but remains focused on issues independent of colonial rule.

The aim of this project is to demonstrate the important role language adopts in the development of the play and how it delineates a linguistic landscape that is constantly being challenged and negotiated. I will investigate how English functions as the language of choice in facilitating the transmission of a Yoruba story, especially in a tragedy that is dense with Yoruba proverbs and figures of speech. Ogundele calls language "the colonial factor" (57) that indirectly demonstrates the impact the colonizers have had on Yoruba culture. In addition, David Richards also supports the belief that vocabulary provides insight into the richness of the proverbial idioms that inform the play. Consequently, the intersection between language and culture becomes apparent through the description of the rituals from the different characters in the play. Elesin's duty, from a Yoruba perspective, is described as his "fate" (Soyinka *DKH* 14) whereas the British characters recoil from foreign tradition and report Elesin's impending death as a "burden" (Soyinka *DKH* 75) stemming from barbaric practices. These linguistic moments portray a shift in the views on ritual suicide and reveal Soyinka to be,

[a] dramatist working as a free, creating agent can.... Us[ing] [ritual] to express his own dissentient vision: he can appear to be going along with the ideals and values embodied in the ritual while, underneath, he is actually exposing its inadequacies and making it condemn itself” (Ogundele 49).

Ritual becomes Soyinka’s way of dissecting the Yoruba society and exposing wavering attitudes long before the arrival of the colonizer. By investigating the changing role of ritual in the play, readers can observe how the Yoruba rely on ceremonial practices to maintain links with the past but also how they depend on the same customs to be relevant for their present circumstances as well.

The examination of language will allow insight into the development of the psyche of the Yoruba natives. By observing the plural functions of language, I will demonstrate how language not only functions as a medium for communication but also how it works as a tool for distancing Western readership. To do so, I will look at the numerous instances where Yoruba proverbs are evoked by the indigenous characters. Wole Soyinka’s *Myth, Literature and the African World* will help me establish a stronger sense of the representation of Yoruba identity. Soyinka argues that the French négritude movement has romanticized literary representations of certain African experiences. To counter what he believes to be a misrepresentation of the African experience (and he even goes as far as calling it a second colonialism), he presents his concept of the “Fourth Stage” in order to create a progressive space for Yoruba mythology and culture. As he mentions in his play, audiences must aim to go beyond “the world of the living, the dead and the unborn” (Soyinka *DKH* 6) and explore a transitional space, which he calls the “Fourth Stage.” Indeed, Soyinka’s “Fourth Stage” serves

as a location where readers can move away from the essentialisms that bind the colonized subject to limited experiences.

I will also investigate linguistic occurrences as a possible means of observing and entering in a dialogue with a transitioning culture. By observing the use of English, Soyinka's play can be placed within the larger debate of African writers struggling with the notion of writing in the colonizer's language. Is Soyinka's play a deliberate attempt at resisting the tradition of African authors writing back to the empire? Is it even possible to transmit an African experience in the English language? These questions have been the focal point of a much larger debate that has notably been tackled by Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. While Ngugi suggests that English is an inaccurate medium that betrays the African experience, Achebe asserts that English is a *lingua franca* that allows for more readers to have access to localized stories. Soyinka manages to incorporate both these views in his play. That is, at times readers can observe passages in English that appear incomprehensible because they are translated from Yoruba proverbs. Femi Osofisan states in "Wole Soyinka and a Living Dramatist" that "although [Soyinka] used the English Language throughout in his dialogues, it never struck us as incongruous or implausible" (48). Indeed, language, specifically English, acquires a hybrid quality that generates numerous sites of meaning production reflecting the confluence of various colonial and native histories. However, English reveals its limited capacity to reproduce the original content of Yoruba proverbs when summoned by the native characters. This characteristic creates a text that contains a direct engagement with the colonizer and reveals conflict in the process of meaning production.

This thesis is comprised of three chapters, each working together to provide a thorough investigation of Soyinka's project to present a local event, such as the traditional Yoruba sacrificial rituals, to a global audience. The first chapter, entitled "Writing the Postcolonial Experience" revisits the debate surrounding the négritude movement and explores the implications of writing a postcolonial story in English. The goal of this chapter is to establish the conceptual and theoretical framework that foreground Soyinka's play. This will also include a discussion of the importance of Soyinka's Author's Note and how it conditions a type of reading that privileges the African voice. I have called the second chapter called "Soyinka's 'New English'" because I believe that the playwright demonstrates a type of writing that reformulates some of the conventions of the English language. As stated by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the only way English can support the African discourse is to formulate linguistic properties. *Death and the King's Horseman* demonstrates an innovative use of English by creating a text that dives into the world of Yoruba proverbs. Here, I will argue that the colonizer isn't simply a catalytic agent but is a force that is highly present in the language of the play. Finally, the third chapter called "Masks, Music and the Language of Transition" investigates how language is not limited to the written or spoken form and that in Yoruba society, music, masks and dance are perhaps more important forms of communication. Soyinka designs these alternative forms of discourse in a way that communicates the true essence of the drama. The sounds of ritual drumming and the native dances help Soyinka flesh out his concept of the "Fourth Stage".

Chapter 1

Writing the Postcolonial Experience in English

I first confronted *Death and the King's Horseman* in 1973, two years before it was published. Soyinka, who was supervising my graduate work in English at the University of Cambridge, invited me to listen to the first reading of his new play. For three hours we listened as Oxford accents struggled to bring the metaphorical and lyrical Yoruba text to life.

(Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Being, the Will and the Semantics of Death")

In the play *Death and the King's Horseman*, Wole Soyinka recounts the events that took place in Oyo, a Yoruba town in 1946. As Elesin Oba, the protagonist and chief horseman to the king, prepares to surrender his physical life after the death of his leader, he is met by the incontestable Simon Pilkings, a British colonial district officer. Pilkings, who is sent to Oyo as a representative of British colonial rule, finds himself in a precarious position. He believes that Elesin is "to commit death...as result of native custom" (Soyinka *DKH* 26), therefore Pilkings concludes that it is his duty to intervene and refrain Elesin from carrying out this action. Elesin, having already demonstrated signs of his reluctance to exercise his duty to his king, does not resist Pilkings' attempts to sway him from following through with the ritual suicide. When Elesin's apprehensive nature eclipses his obligation to his society, conflict arises which disrupts the peace of his community.

Soyinka's play received high praise from many critics and writers who believed that the oeuvre presented a compelling reflection on Yoruba life. Indeed, *Death and the King's*

Horseman enjoyed critical success and Soyinka went on to receive the Nobel Prize for literature in 1986 (Gikandi vii). In its congratulatory statement to the author, the Swedish Academy for Literature acknowledged Soyinka's achievement and recognized that "the relationship between the unborn, the living, and the dead, to which Soyinka reverts several times in his works, is fashioned here with a strong effect" (Gikandi vii). However, despite numerous accolades, Soyinka's work also received much criticism, often targeted at passages that are deeply entrenched in Yoruba rhetoric. Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s testimonial, cited in my epigraph, reveals the complex nature of Soyinka's prose and reflects on the peculiar effects of reading – and listening – to foreign readers trying to animate Yoruba words. Simon Gikandi also notes that among many of the concerns surrounding this text, the "structure, language and form" (xv) of the play seem the most difficult to grasp. Similarly, Tanure Ojaide echoes this sentiment as he recounts the challenges of teaching the play at the University of North Carolina. He states, "[w]hile Soyinka is able to blend Yoruba thoughts into English effortlessly, students have problems with the indigenous background of his voice" (Ojaide 116). Essentially, English-speaking readers are perplexed by the reality of engaging with a text in their own language, but not understanding the meaning of once familiar words. It becomes apparent that the struggling "Oxford accents" described by Gates Jr., expose the challenge of reading a work that requires more than a fluency in English. Hence, Soyinka's feat is not a work of translation but masterful engagement with words, which, in turn, reshapes the parameters of language itself.

In addition to language, the plot of the action has also become a source of fascination for audiences. Indeed, the introduction of Elesin Oba as a sacrificial figure divides readers who

are tormented by the fate of this tragic character. The unfamiliarity with particular Yoruba customs stands as a barometer between readers from different interpretative communities.³ Once again, Tanure Ojaide reflects on the responses from his students when broaching the nature of Elesin's responsibility to the *egungun*.⁴ He recounts one student asking, "Is it okay to commit wrong acts in the name of tradition?" (Ojaide 117). The question worries the limitations of reading a play fixed in indigenous culture. Tackling Soyinka's work without acknowledging the conventions of Yoruba life compromises a reader's ability to comprehend Elesin's duties to his people. But more importantly, the reader's own cultural perspective overrides any learned theoretical approaches that might help the understanding of the mores and customs of the Yoruba. By contemplating whether the protagonist was "wrong" to uphold his ancestor's traditions, Ojaide reveals the complicated task of familiarizing new readers with the realities of Soyinka's text but also the challenges in reformulating certain interpretive strategies. Undoubtedly, the author's objective is not so much to compel audiences to sympathize with the obligations of the king's horseman and establish whether Elesin is 'wrong' or 'right', but to portray a society undergoing a transitory phase. Therefore, *Death and the King's Horseman* must, on numerous occasions, refrain its readers from becoming too concerned with moral debates surrounding Elesin's impending death and reorient the focus on the morphological changes that are shifting the "order of Yoruba cosmology" (Booth 544).

³ I borrow this term from Stanley Fish. According to Fish, an interpretive community consists of interlocutors who recognize meaning because of similarities in the way they process information. These strategies help shape a person's response to a work according to the conventions of his or her specific interpretive community.

⁴ The Yoruba term *egungun* refers to the Oyo monarchy (Soyinka, "Theatre in African Traditional Cultures," 90).

Taking into consideration the many challenges of reading Soyinka's play, readers must also discern the much-debated Author's Note. This brief introduction outlines a series of requests from the author and has become a major point of contention among many critics. In addition to divulging that the plot of his play is loosely inspired by true events that took place in the town of Oyo in 1946, Soyinka also insists that the reading of his play should not necessarily suppose a "clash of cultures" (*DKH 5*). In other words, the author resists a type of engagement that ultimately opposes the townspeople of Oyo to the increasingly dominant British officials. One reason for this objection is that the label 'clash of culture' would not only be too reductive, but it would also suppose that the "alien culture" and the "indigenous" one (to use Soyinka's terms) share a similar experience (*DKH 5*). In other words, Soyinka seeks to remind his readers that the colonial subjugation of the Yoruba in the town of Oyo can hardly be defined as a clash or discord. The author explains,

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. (*DKH 5*)

By describing the colonial presence in his play as a "catalytic incident," Soyinka reveals his position on the role Simon Pilkings plays in Elesin Oba's cosmic trajectory. For the author, Pilkings is not a modifying force in Elesin's individual progression, but his presence certainly complicates the nature of the plot.

Above all, describing the British colonizers as catalysts has divided readers and prompted critics such as Wole Ogundele to ask “Where does the external (colonial) factor come in then, if at all?” (55). Similarly, Anthony Appiah contends that Soyinka’s cautions appear slightly disingenuous. Although Appiah acknowledges that reading the play as a clash of culture may indeed suppose that “the colonizer and colonized meet on culturally equal terms,” he affirms that it is in fact “absurd to deny that novel and play have something to say about that relationship” (105). He adds, “[t]he Colonial factor is not a catalytic incident merely; it is a profound assault on the consciousness of the African intellectual, in the consciousness that guides this play” (Appiah 105). Appiah asserts that the colonizer’s existence is certainly apparent in the collective consciousness of the Yoruba people and therefore cannot be ignored or relegated to the role of an expeditor. Appiah vocalizes this argument by stating,

It is one thing to say (as I think correctly) that the drama in Oyo is driven ultimately by the logic of Yoruba cosmology, another to deny the existence of a dimension of power in which it is the colonial state that forms the action. (105)

Here, Appiah demonstrates his reluctance to downplay the presence of British forces and confronts Soyinka’s attempts at focusing solely on the Yoruba world. Thus, Appiah and Ogundele underline the confusing nature of the Author’s Note and insist on cementing the undeniable presence and influence of the colonizer.

The controversy surrounding Soyinka’s use of the word ‘catalyst’ incited a vast array of responses from readers who seek clarification on the role of the colonizer within the play.

As a result, a series of important concerns emerge regarding the significance of this transmuting term. Hence, it becomes imperative to pause on Soyinka's characterization of Simon Pilkings as a catalyst. What are the author's intentions when describing the colonial force as a catalytic element? In addition, it is important to ask, what does Pilkings' presence change in the narrative then? By characterizing the arrival of Simon Pilkings as a catalytic event, Soyinka is not dismissing the impact of the British, but in fact recognizing their involvement in the events that take place after the passing of the Alafin.⁵ Certainly, the playwright's refusal to let Elesin's story become contaminated by reductive binarisms, which would inevitably impose limits on the possible interpretations of his play, serves a productive purpose. However, Soyinka's prefatory comments seem to deliberately distance British characters from Yoruba players in an attempt to contain the colonial intrusion on the development of the action. Categorizing the presence of the foreign invaders as circumstantial elements reveals a series of important observations. As a catalyst,⁶ the British envoys ostensibly facilitate the progression of Elesin's story. Hence, a catalyst doesn't cause the unfolding of an event, but merely accelerates its development. Therefore, Soyinka is suggesting that the events that occurred in Oyo would have taken place regardless of the influence of colonial delegates and that "Pilkings' meddling merely deepens the tragedy" (Hepburn 179). Indeed, many times Elesin exhibits his attachment to the material world and many times he foreshadows his eventual failure to complete the ritual suicide. The earliest example of the protagonist's hedonistic drive is displayed in the first few exchanges of the

⁵ Alafin is the Yoruba terminology for king (Moore 113).

⁶ The Oxford English Dictionary defines a catalyst as "the name given by Berzelius to the effect produced in facilitating a chemical reaction, by the presence of a substance, which itself undergoes no permanent change". I use the principle of a chemical catalyst to interpret Soyinka's explanation of the British colonial figure as a catalyst to the action of the plot.

play when the Praise-Singer reveals that Elesin has already delayed his responsibilities to his community. Instead, the king's horseman has been compelled to take a wife even when he is fully aware of his limited time in the world of the living and that more importantly, the woman has already been promised to another man. Readers are introduced to an individual struggling to reconcile his earthly desires with the internal dynamics of his people's way of life. In fact, the first act even begins by informing the audience that the action is taking place in "[a] passage through a market in its closing stages" (Soyinka *DKH* 9). This description mimics the final chapter in Elesin's life and illustrates the portrait of a man in transit between two stages of existence. As the market resumes its daily activities, Elesin must also come to terms with his impending death. Thus, when we meet Elesin for the first time, he is already showing signs of hesitation and displays behaviors that anticipate his eventual failure to complete the ritual suicide. Hence, Soyinka is not "conceal[ing] his purposes" (105) with his description of the British colonizers in his Author's Note, as suggested by Appiah, but exerting an authorial presence in order to focus the reader's attention on the shifting of Yoruba beliefs.

Nevertheless, Appiah and Ogundele's reproaches bring forth anxieties regarding the role Soyinka attributes to the colonizer in his play. If readers comply with Soyinka's statement and accept that Pilkings' presence only drives the action within the play to develop quicker, then it is possible to say that on a plot-based level, the colonizer appears as a catalyst. However, *Death and the King's Horseman* is recognized for much more than its storyline. Above all, Soyinka's tragedy is a feat in a type of storytelling that crosses linguistic and cultural boundaries and acquires a hybrid quality. Indeed, Henry Louis Gates Jr. states, "Soyinka's greatest achievement is just this: the creation of a compelling world through

language, in language, of language” (161). Therefore, in Soyinka’s work, language has emerged as the play’s crowning achievement. Language is where a potential ‘clash of cultures’ becomes possible since Soyinka uses a blend of Yoruba metaphors, Nigerian Pidgin, the Queen’s English, and translation strategies to create a unique linguistic landscape. Gates Jr. emphatically states,

[Soyinka] has mastered the power of language to create a reality, and not merely to reflect reality. But this mastery of spoken language is necessarily reinforced by mastery of a second language of music, and a third of the dance. (161)

This statement coincides with Soyinka’s own wishes to consider the lyrical qualities of *Death and the King’s Horseman* and to observe how language becomes the meeting point for the colonizer and the colonized. Soyinka affirms that his Author’s Note endeavors to direct the reader’s vision “to the far more difficult and risky task of eliciting the play’s threnodic essence” (*DKH* 5). In other words, the playwright exposes how he views threnody⁷ as a highly poetic technique that is woven into every word and which ultimately shapes the entire structure of his piece, a claim that I will expand upon later in this chapter.

Although Soyinka’s proposition appears somewhat deflective of the criticism he has garnered from readers who question his rejection of the ‘clash of cultures’ label, the author motions for a type of reading based on the diction and rhetoric of the play. In *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*, Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins explore the significance of language as a colonial conduit when they state that postcolonialism is,

⁷ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, threnody is a song of lament or a lament for the dead.

an engagement with, and contestation of colonialism's discourses, power structures, and social hierarchies. Colonisation is insidious: it invades far more than political chambers and extends well beyond independence celebrations. Its effects shape language, education, religion, artistic sensibilities, and, increasingly, popular culture.

(2)

This definition of postcolonialism underscores the importance of language as a locus of knowledge production. In other words, language not only retraces cultural influences imbedded in society but also reveals many factors in the development of culture. This reality undoubtedly

fuelled the inception of *négritude*,⁸ a literary movement headed by “French-speaking black intellectuals” who wished to represent “the reaction of the black man to the colonial situation” (Irele “What is *Négritude*” 203). Although *négritude* saw its genesis in the Francophone world, the ideologies quickly crossed over French quarters and migrated to other linguistic spheres. Abiola Irele states, “*Négritude* can be taken to correspond to a certain form of Pan-Negro feeling and awareness” (“What is *Négritude*” 203), stressing the flexibility of this term and how it has come to symbolize black struggle. Moreover, Irele adds that *négritude* represents the “passionate exaltation of the black race, associated with a romantic myth of Africa” (204). In other words, *négritude* becomes a quest for “new world view[s]” and also

⁸ Linguistic tensions in the African canon first arose in French literature, namely in the works of Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon Damas. Together, they pioneered a literary movement known as *négritude*, which was “essentially a movement for cultural nationalism by black Francophone intellectuals that helped to lay the foundation for Africa’s later political liberation” (Lewis, 26). *Négritude* set in motion a series of critical engagements that primarily focused on establishing a voice for works emerging from the African continent. At the forefront of this endeavor was the quest to establish a form of expression that would represent the growing desire for cultural liberation and a language that could would “reflect black subjectivity” (Lewis 23).

and attempt to recover “a certain sense of spiritual integrity by the black man” (Irele “What is Négritude” 204).

Soyinka, on the other hand, has always been critical of writers who appeared to essentialize African identity. When contemplating previous representations of African peoples, he claims, “Africa minus the Sahara North is still a very large continent, populated by myriad races and cultures. With its millions of inhabitants it must be the largest metaphysical vacuum ever conjured up for the purpose of racist propaganda” (Soyinka *Myth* 97). This statement underlines the author’s frustrations at depictions that inevitably homogenize the subtleties of each region. Although négritude seeks to create new approaches for black writers to express their realities, Soyinka has often argued that the movement prioritizes race as a way of constructing cultural identities.

As a vocal opponent of négritude, Soyinka cautions readers not to consign the African experience to the moment when the European colonizer arrives to inscribe it into the written word. Therefore, among his critiques of négritude, Soyinka states that African works of literature are too often designed as “an appendage of English Literature” (*Myth, Literature and the African World* viii.). Furthermore, he accuses négritude writers of adopting a “romanticized rhetoric” and of exhibiting modes of representation that insist on developing Africa in the “orbit of external factors” (Gikandi ix). Indeed, he reinstates his reluctance of “the claims of Négritude since [his] earliest contact with its exegetes” (Gikandi viii) and even positions himself as an ‘anti-Négritudinist’. Rather, Soyinka offers a new literary initiative to abate some of the controversies regarding writing within the négritude tradition and states that an ideal “solution” would be to seek a “continuing objective re-statement of that self-

apprehension, to call attention to it in living works of the imagination, placing them in the context of primal systems of apprehension of the race” (Gikandi xii). In fact, Soyinka emphasizes his focus on self-apprehension⁹ on multiple occasions during the preface of *Myth, Literature and the African World*, underlining the importance of resisting a negative reading of indigenous histories.

Similarly, Femi Osofisan attests that “post-Négritude” serves a productive purpose of further developing the postcolonial African subject because it “seeks to identify, emphasize, and promote certain cultural aspects of the black African world which it believes have been under threat of erasure by first, colonialism, and secondly, by the present ‘global (translate: ‘American’) cultural incursions” (9). Furthermore, post-Négritude writing resists a “blanket exoticization” (Osofisan 10), which allows for indigenous histories to come to the forefront of the postcolonial debate. More importantly, Osofisan states that post-Négritude “does not reject wholesale the use of the inherited colonial language as a language of national communication and of artistic creation; but it also recognizes the validity of our local languages, and advocates the promotion of all of these in equal measure with the adopted national *lingua franca*” (10). Interestingly, Osofisan’s argument not only stresses the significance of language as a means of communication but also recognizes that the ‘inherited colonial language’, in this case English, has the potential to benefit native stories.

⁹ In *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Soyinka mentions his project of self-apprehension as the impetus to a better understanding of the dynamism of African traditions. He explains, “[t]he essays on drama will be seen as more recent corroborations of this central concern to transmit through analysis of myth and ritual the self-apprehension of the African world” (ix). For Soyinka, the act of understanding the self is an essential component to the development of his play. By definition, self-apprehension is an individual task that requires the subject to become aware of himself. Therefore, this type of engagement encourages readers to view Elesin as an individual and not as a carrier of communal values. The focus then revolves around the transformation and reinvention of traditions in Elesin’s town.

The application of English in postcolonial narratives presents a series of concerns regarding the place of this colonial import, which in Soyinka's play, is utilized to describe a community vying to define its cultural identity. In fact, *Death and the King's Horseman* is often denounced for his contentious use of English as the principle medium for the telling of a story about a town in Oyo. Many critics are conflicted with the idea of creating a tale fixed in Yoruba mythology in a language that once represented a colonial threat. Readers might question whether English can register the sociocultural specificity of the Yoruba landscape. Simon Gikandi stipulates that Soyinka's chief objective is to use modes of representation that would allow him to write about "African realities and identities" that are represented "outside the orbit of external factors, including the colonial experience itself" (ix). How is this project possible if Soyinka is using the language that was once used in an attempt to erase indigenous tongues? Wouldn't the use of English place Soyinka's work at the very center of the colonizer's universe? Furthermore, can this form of communication be an effective medium to recount the events of a colonized people? Chinua Achebe reiterates this last query emphatically when he posits: "the real question is not whether Africans could write in English but whether they ought to" (62). These lines of inquiry are part of a larger and ongoing linguistic debate that stems from 1950s and 1960s¹⁰ which, as seen earlier, also have roots that extended to the négritude movement. This polemic also became a focal point for many of Africa's important writers choosing to write in English. In June 1962, an assembly of African

¹⁰ Similar academic exchanges had already taken place in French-speaking circles. In 1956, a few years prior to the conference in Makerere University, a collection of influential writers and scholars assembled in Paris for the first Congress of Black Writers and Artists. Three years later, the debate was revived in Rome with a second meeting where writers like Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, George Lamming, Frantz Fanon, Édouard Glissant, Josephine Baker, and Jean-Paul Sartre discussed issues affecting the development of the postcolonial experience. These gatherings were part of the genesis of African literature and marked the rapid expansion of this new field of study.

writers and scholars joined in Makerere University in Uganda to participate in what would become a groundbreaking conference concerning the emergence of African works of literature being produced in English. Among the attendees were many of Africa's most prolific writers including Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, James Ngugi (later known as Ngugi wa Thiong'o), Bloke Modisane, Ezekiel Mphahlele and Wole Soyinka. This event, entitled "A Conference of African Writers of English Expression," presented many opinions from academics who shared their views on the evolution of the African literary canon and explained their anxieties concerning the choice of the English vernacular.

As one of the earliest skeptics of English letters in postcolonial literature, Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues that committing solely to English to tell an African story can be a betrayal. He states, while "the bullet was the means of physical subjugation, language was the means of spiritual subjugation" (Ngugi 9). By imposing English as the new *lingua franca*, British imperialists severed a close bond African natives had with their culture, land, and language. As a result, English became synonymous with oppression and antagonistic measures. Readers get a better sense of the socio-cultural perils that English presented in the African continent through Ngugi's opinion that "language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world," which also underscores the inextricability of language and culture (16).¹¹ In contrast, Achebe defends African writers who produce work in English,

¹¹ Here, I would also like to add Tim William Machan's work on the increasing production of Anglophone works in postcolonial regions. In *Language Anxiety*, he observes how the expansion of English appears to pose a threat to indigenous forms of communication. He explains,

[s]ince language instruction, much less use, is not value-free, the global expansion of English at the expense of indigenous languages has alarmed other critics not simply because it will facilitate the demise of these languages, but because it necessarily brings with the language Anglo-American cultural,

seeing them as “by-products of the same process that made the new nation states of Africa” (Achebe 57). He demystifies the negative images associated with African works written in English, which are often viewed as “unpatriotic” (Achebe 57). Instead, he champions writers who choose the international vernacular because of its ability to transmit a story to a global audience. He describes English as a “nation-wide currency” that permits people to understand and communicate within a same set of linguistic conventions (Achebe 58). Indeed, writing in English allows Soyinka to open a dialogue with his Anglophone readers. The accessibility of the English language permits the author’s work to venture across many boundaries. However, although the play appears to be crafted for a global audience, it presents a series of challenges for a foreign reader. Soyinka’s manipulation of English echoes Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s urges to reformulate the parameters of the colonizer’s language. Although he perceives English to be heavily endowed with remnants of a colonial past, Ngugi wa Thiong’o doesn’t underestimate the power the writer inherits when composing a text. He claims the “English language will be able to carry the weight of [his] African experience, [b]ut it will have to be a new English” (Ngugi 8). This “new English” must inevitably support African realities, all the while remaining faithful to the structural conventions of the language. Achebe demonstrates a similar approach by explaining that it is “neither necessary nor desirable” (61) to pursue a type of engagement with the English language that would resemble that of native speakers. In other words, writers should aim to use English in a manner that would carry the nuances of a postcolonial experience. Ultimately, refashioning English to conform to African realities

economic and political values. Merely to speak English, in this analysis, is to further imperialism (to ‘inhabit’ its discourse). (20)

Hence, according to Machan, the prevalence of the English tongue also increases the presence of other factors that are closely related to language such as political, economical and cultural ideologies.

presents a progressive way of transitioning rhetoric to incorporate indigenous voices. Where does Wole Soyinka's *Death and The King's Horseman* figure in this dialectic?

Soyinka's approach to this question or, as he puts it, the "problem of nomenclature" (*Myth* viii) is centered on an attempt at "self apprehension"¹² (*Myth* xi). In "Elesin Oba and the Critics", Soyinka explains that upon the initial reading of his work, his university professor at Leeds questioned the "sophisticated" style of speech of the characters. In response, Soyinka explained, "Yes, they do speak in such 'sophisticated' terms, they do conceptualize and give verbal expression to the resulting concepts, but – they engage in this routine exercise in their own *language*" (174). He adds that this new standard of communication is "adequate at [the character's] level of world and self-apprehending" ("Elesin Oba and the Critics" 174), underlining the self-reflexive nature of language and how it is customized and transformed by the speaker. Hence, this desire to better understand the 'self' appears through the way each speaker approaches language. Critic Philip Brockband states that the diction of the text "makes covert connections between one range of values and another" (81). In other words, the dialogue within the story seeks to not only to display the tradition of the Yoruba people in order to help readers understand why Elesin must sacrifice himself to his king, but more importantly, many passages are designed to appear more accessible to an audience that is well-versed in the cultural heritage of Yoruba. Therefore, the play demonstrates characteristics that make it simultaneously accessible and inaccessible. It is accessible because of the presence of English as a global language but still prioritizes the Yoruba audience due to the myriad of culturally specific references. It is exactly because of this reality that many critics wrestle with

¹² See footnote 9.

the diction of the play. For example, Stanley Macebuh comments, “the language of Soyinka’s poetry is archaic, cacophonous, disruptive, precisely because it is a contemporary equivalent of Yoruba mythic language” (37). Numerous critics who also struggle to grasp the true intention behind Soyinka’s style of prose reiterate this comment in their own interpretations of the play.

However, Macebuh recognizes that Soyinka’s incongruous and perhaps even antiquated choice of words deliberately strays from British conventions in order to create a space for the development of the African voice. In effect, *Death and the King’s Horseman* qualifies as an experiment in what Ngugi wa Thiong’o calls ‘new English’; an English that is no longer exclusive to native speakers but that is available to people who wish to use it as their own. No doubt, Soyinka’s presence at the “Conference of African Writers of English Expression” shaped the way the author viewed standardized English and its relationship with African writers.¹³ It becomes imperative for Soyinka to restructure English to not only expose its colonial origins, but to realign the linguistic vectors to support a new African discourse.

As part of a newer generation of African authors writing in English, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie also comments on the different transformations the English language has undergone since its importation by British settlers. In an interview with the *Women’s Caucus of the African Literature Association*, she clarifies,

I’d like to say something about English as well, which is simply that English is mine.

Sometimes we talk about English in Africa as if Africans have no agency, as if there is

¹³ At the time of the “Conference of African Writers of English Expression,” Soyinka was only 28 years old. As one of the youngest writers invited for the panel, Soyinka found himself surrounded by peers who most probably shaped his views on the nature of English as a worldwide language. Also refer to footnote 10.

not a distinct form of English spoken in Anglophone African countries. I was educated in it; I spoke it at the same time as I spoke Igbo. My English-speaking is rooted in a Nigerian experience and not in a British or American or Australian one. I have taken ownership of English. (2)

Although her life is not shadowed by colonialism, she presents her views on post-Independence writing and its myriad problems. Her opinion demonstrates the increasing necessity to reposition the African writer within the English canon. More importantly, Adichie emphasizes that her use of the English language is informed by her contemporary Nigerian experience, which allows her work to acquire cultural elements that are representative of her reality. Adichie's comments also underscore the responsibilities that emerge as a result of speaking a language. Hence, the act of speaking also perpetuates political and cultural affiliations through language.

Adichie's quest to personalize her use of English is also shared by Henry Louis Gates Jr. who, as referenced earlier in the chapter, expresses,

Soyinka's greatest achievement is just this: the creation of a compelling world through language, in language, and of language. He has mastered the power of language to create a reality, and not merely to reflect reality. But his mastery of spoken language is necessarily reinforced by mastery of a second language of music, and a third of the dance. (161)

Soyinka's manipulation of the English not only demonstrates his proficiency in the language of the colonizer but it also uses linguistic properties that highlight Yoruba traditions. In this sense, Soyinka's use of language, specifically English, transcends the structural conventions that native English speakers have grown accustomed to.

Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s statement also reveals that language is not specifically limited to the spoken word and that in fact, it encompasses different types of sonority. Oral traditions, ritual songs and even native dances all appear to be incorporated within the text. These different modes of representation help Soyinka craft his project of self-apprehension.¹⁴ As mentioned earlier, the threnodic form presents an important moment of self-awareness and cultural introspection. To understand fully the tragic nature of the plot, one needs to investigate the presence of the god Ogun in the Yoruba universe. Although he is never explicitly mentioned in the play, Ogun is undoubtedly one of the central figures in Elesin's world.¹⁵ In *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Soyinka describes Ogun as "transcendental, humane but rigidly restorative justice" (Soyinka 141). Ogun presides over the inhabitants of Oyo to ensure that all facets of Yoruba mythology are in balance. As a transcendental agent, Ogun seeks to maintain a spiritual equilibrium within all realms of the Yoruba cosmos. Hence, the forces of Ogun propel Elesin to follow through with the rituals of

¹⁴ Brian Crow explains that self-apprehension is "a key concept in Soyinka's thinking, signifying the moment of expanded awareness in which individuals and even entire societies bring past, present and future together in a perspective which is both historically and spiritually truthful" (92). In other words, Soyinka endeavors to flesh out the Yoruba universe and demonstrate the bonds between the world of the living, the dead and the unborn. Therefore, for Soyinka, self-apprehension is a task that is not fixed in time or solely concerned with the past, but it is an attempt to study the changing nature of Yoruba culture.

¹⁵ In *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Soyinka demonstrates just how many Yoruba gods present similarities to Greek deities. He explains, "Ogun, for his part, is best understood in Hellenic values as a totality of the Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean virtues" (*Myth* 141). Although this thesis will not focus on Soyinka's theories on the history of Greek mythology, it is important to mention that his drama inhabits components from Greek tragedy.

his community as it is an integral component to the prosperity of his land. Ato Quayson confirms this reality and posits, “Ogun represents the supreme sacrifice not only on behalf of the gods but also on behalf of the communal ethos” (208). Moreover, Ogun’s “tragic agency” (Quayson 216) creates the threnodic notes that permeate through language. As Soyinka’s “muse and patron god” (Macebuh 37), Ogun becomes intrinsically linked to the tragic event of Elesin Oba’s journey.

In his article “Theory, Myth and Ritual in the Work of Soyinka”, Quayson delves deeper into the role of this elusive deity and argues that Ogun “is the more appropriate god for present historical circumstances” (206). In effect, Ogun figures as one of the many deities that inform the Yoruba universe. Often compared to its counterpart Obatala,¹⁶ Ogun presents an energetic factor; an embodiment of creative forces. Quayson reveals that the god is “seen as the embodiment of ‘creativity’ as opposed to ‘creation’”. This principle involves both harmony and rupture in the service of artistic production. Additionally, he is also the embodiment of challenge and the hubristic impulse of the rebel” (206). Ogun’s rebellious tendencies are in fact what drive Soyinka’s vehemence to incorporate a diction that defies expectations. When studying the development of Ogun in Soyinka’s work, Quayson cautions audiences that interpretations which seek to cast characters as representations of the deity will only culminate in a counterproductive reading. In other words, paralleling characters to the literary incarnations of this god “undermines any attempt to trace the various alterations to the Ogun

¹⁶ In *Myth Literature and the African World*, Soyinka describes Obatala as “the placid essence of creation” while Ogun is considered “the creative urge and instinct, the essence of creativity” (141). In his investigation of the Yoruba deities, Ato Quayson categorizes Obatala as the god of patience, suffering, peaceableness, quietude and forbearance (206).

ideal which, taken together, depict a continual process of growth, contradiction and elaboration in Soyinka's work" (Quayson 203). In addition, Quayson maintains that viewing individuals in the play as agents for Ogun would be a "monotonous critical manoeuvre" (203) that would halt Soyinka's project of depicting a society in transition. However, according to Quayson, what Soyinka does make clear is that Ogun's volatile nature and the shifting worldviews of the actors in the play demonstrate characteristics of a society undergoing a critical transformation.

Focusing on Ogunian traits not only helps shape Yoruba mythology, but also provides insight on the driving forces that inform the diction of the text. As one of the important gods in Elesin's belief system, Ogun is imbued in all aspects of Soyinka's play, including language. Stanley Macebuh confirms that "Soyinka's language is, however, more difficult; it creates grater impression of tension and disjuncture because his poetic model is the poetry of the cultic worshipers of Ogun" (39). Therefore, Ogun infuses the text with mythological motifs that perhaps complicate the reception of meaning for non-Yoruba audiences.¹⁷ As an agent of tragedy, Ogun also anchors the threnodic elements that are apparent in Elesin's tragic evolution.

Ultimately, by studying the linguistic complexities of Soyinka's work, readers can observe sites of cultural significance that are locked in language. The panoply of proverbs and imagery not only ground the text in a type of discourse that privileges the indigenous voice but

¹⁷ Stanley Macebuh makes use of the god Obatala to demonstrate different types of Yoruba poetics. He claims that while Obatala employs diction that is "transparent, simple and lucid," Ogun leaves an impression of "tension and disjuncture" (39). Hence, Ogun's influence informs the development of Soyinka's metaphysical realm and creates a world that is immersed in proverbial dialogue.

also provides insight into the communal ethos. Hence, Ogun's tragic agency helps better understand the "ambiguity of the play's language" (Gates Jr. 160). As this thesis delves deeper into Soyinka's play, the merits of an inquiry on language become more apparent. Readers can observe the intricacies in the drama and how dialogue, song and dance all merge to form a conversation with readers. The invocation of Ogun creates a type of literature that highlights the folkloric tradition of the Yoruba people and celebrates the author's "mythic imagination" (Macebuh 29). Thus, Soyinka's work becomes a meeting point for language and myth to fusion into a contemporary form of discourse that also carries ancestral memory. Hence, audiences can observe how the "problem of language" is deeply rooted in Soyinka's mythic imagination" (Macebuh 29). Stanley Macebuh argues,

If, then, we find in spite of this a condition of linguistic stress in Soyinka's attempts to communicate the mythic heritage of African man, the question must be asked why this is the case; and it is at this point that we begin to realize that the problem of language in Soyinka is a two-fold problem, the one deriving from Soyinka's sense of his relation to his colonial burden, another, more internal, relating to the very nature of the body of myth with which he is occupied. (29-30)

Macebuh's theory reveals that Soyinka's play often poses a series of challenges for readers because it is simultaneously trying to reconfigure its relationship with colonial history while remaining truthful to Yoruba folklore. Finally, Macebuh clarifies that Soyinka's engagement with poetic mysticism is not anchored in the past, but rather an inquiry in the "contemporary behaviour[s]" (30) of the people of Oyo. Hence, the focus on Yoruba myth and the poetic

form of Soyinka's text result in a type of writing that can be qualified as mythopoeic¹⁸.

Soyinka then uses language to support mythic meaning and is able to track the transformation in each character's individual experience.

¹⁸ Northrop Frye theorizes that mythopoeic poetry appeals to writers who "are deeply concerned with the origin or destiny or desires of mankind – with anything that belongs to the larger outlines of what literature can express – can hardly find a literary theme that does not coincide with a myth" (600). Hence, myth emerges as a space for writers to peer into the historical traditions of a society.

Chapter 2

Soyinka's 'New English'

Soyinka has done for our napping language what brigand dramatists from Ireland have done for centuries: booted it awake, rifled its pockets and scattered the loot into the middle of next week.

(Penelope Gilliatt, "A Nigerian Original" in *Observer*)

Soyinka has invented a tragic form, and registered it in his own invented language, a fusion of English and Yoruba. Surely this is his greatest achievement.

(Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Being, the Will and the Semantics of Death")

Language change produces, in a word, anxiety. And perhaps a better word than *produces* here is *focuses*, for part of the anxiety is in fact over the nature of the relationship between language change and transformation in the extralinguistic worlds of politics, religion and social interaction. Does language change portend changes in these worlds? Does it cause them? Is it the direct result of other kinds of change or does it merely accompany them?

(Tim William Machan, *Language Anxiety*)

In the last epigraph, Tim William Machan recognizes how linguistic developments often occur in conjunction with changes in the community of interlocutors using that same language. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, language becomes a site that registers the impact of the colonial past as well as the contemporary socio-political climate of the town of Oyo. The arrival of the colonizer challenges certain belief systems that anchor the individuals in Soyinka's story. As Simon Pilkings and his fellow British envoys become increasingly influential, readers recognize the impact of the colonizers in the story's progression and even

more so in the choices of literary representation. Despite Soyinka's effort to resist an entirely postcolonial reading of his work, the play demonstrates a rich fusion of different rhetorical styles, some of which find their origins in Western literary traditions. It is perhaps impossible to determine definitively whether the shifts in language occur as a cause or an effect of a changing culture, but it remains that fluctuations in language are symptomatic of a society undergoing transition. Thus, Machan notes that language becomes charged with 'anxiety', an indicator that speakers feel the need to formulate new approaches to the ways they communicate through words. This very same sense of anxiety is also exhibited in *Death and the King's Horseman*, as Soyinka displays his ingenuitive utilization of the English language and creates an elaborate nexus of linguistic relations that reveals the dynamic status of the people of Oyo.

The first act begins with an exchange between the Praise-Singer and Elesin in a crowded market. Their dialogue presents an amalgamation of Standard English and Nigerian Pidgin:

PRAISE-SINGER: Elesin o! Elesin Oba! Howu! What tryst is this the cockerel goes to keep with such haste that he must leave his tail behind?

ELESIN (slows down a bit, laughing): A tryst where the cockerel needs no adornment.

PRAISE-SINGER: O-oh, you hear that my companions? That's the way the world goes. Because the man approaches a brand new bride he forgets the long faithful mother of his children.

ELESIN: When the horse sniffs the stable does he not strain at the bridle? The market is the long-suffering home of my spirit and the women are packing up to go. That

Esu-harrassed day slipped into the stewpot while we feasted. We ate it up with the rest of the meat. I have neglected my women.

PRAISE-SINGER: We know all that. Still it's no reason for shedding your tail on this day of all days. I know the women will cover you in damask and *alari* but when the wind blows cold from behind, that's when the fowl knows his true friend.

ELESIN: Olohun-iyo! (Soyinka *DKH* 9)

Here, readers learn of Elesin's recent nuptials and gather that the Praise-Singer is mocking Elesin's lust for beautiful women. At first glance, it appears that parts of the text are direct translations of Yoruba speech. Although readers can decipher the meaning of this exchange, the script remains complicated by Yoruba metaphors and imagery. Soyinka opens his play at a moment where the plot is immersed in Yoruba sensibilities and drops his audience in the heart of the action. However, Craig McLukie explains that, though the dialogue presents localized figurative language that may confuse "those uninitiated to Soyinka's dramaturgy" (147), it also demonstrates stylistic similarities to Shakespearean tragedies.¹⁹ McLukie posits that readers familiar with Shakespearean dramas would be able to delineate discursive patterns that would facilitate the understanding of Yoruba proverbs. For example, when the Praise-Singer remarks, "What tryst is this the cockerel goes to keep with such haste that he must leave his tail behind?," the diction and structure of the line are distinctly Shakespearean. "Cockerel," a word usually "applied to a young man" (OED)²⁰ has an Anglo-Norman etymology and

¹⁹ Often called Africa's Shakespeare, Soyinka's play exhibits characteristics often found in Shakespearean tragedies. The five-act structure, verse in iambic pentameter, the approximate twenty-four hour time frame as well as the bodies on stage present some of the elements often representative of Shakespearean dramas. In the dialogue between Elesin and the Praise-Singer, the former's tragic flaw starts to surface as his insatiable fondness for material possessions (especially women) becomes more apparent.

²⁰ Definition C2. of cockerel from the Oxford English Dictionary.

appears in 16th and 17th century England. Similarly, the word “tryst,” used to describe Elesin’s meeting with his new bride finds its origins in Middle English.²¹ The Oxford English dictionary cites that the word ‘tryst’ is “Now *rare* or *Obs.*,”²² meaning that Soyinka has chosen to exhume a word that has been dormant in the English language and revive it in an African context. Moreover, the syntax of the sentence presents particularities that break with modern grammar and syntax. Stepping away from the traditional subject, verb, object order, Soyinka inverts the grammatical pattern of the sentence to create dramatic effect and place the emphasis the words “tryst” and “cockerel”. Of course, this is not a writing method that is particular to Soyinka’s style but was largely used by Elizabethan writers, especially Shakespeare. Shakespeare himself was a writer who played with conventions and stretched language to form new meaning combinations. During his time, Shakespeare presented innovative styles of writing and utilized language in ways that defied convention. Even today, Shakespeare’s texts are open only to those trained in early modern English. Thus, Soyinka creates a version of English that acknowledges its sociolinguistic background but also generates new styles of conversations that are particular to the people of Oyo.

Like Shakespeare, Soyinka also demonstrates a similar enthusiasm for language. In effect, from the very beginning of the play, the playwright employs narrative strategies that showcase his familiarity of the British literary giant while remaining focused on Yoruba representations. He purposely uses writing systems that favor the ethnographic qualities of language and modernizes a type of exchange that is “highly idiosyncratic” (Wright 27). For

²¹ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a tryst is a “mutual appointment, agreement, engagement, covenant”.

²² Definition C1. of tryst from the Oxford English Dictionary.

example, in the same conversation between Elesin and the Praise-Singer, many words demonstrate Shakespearean qualities but other expressions remain indecipherable to a public lacking Yoruba sensibilities. When Elesin mentions that the “Esu-harassed spirit” has infiltrated the communal stewpot and later cries out “Olohun-iyó” (*DKH* 9),²³ the full impact of these words remains exclusive to readers who share common “interpretive strategies” (Fish 217).²⁴ Still, Soyinka provides his readers with a short lexicon, which explains that an *alari* is “a rich, woven cloth brightly coloured” (*DKH* 77), but specific discursive gaps remain. Elesin Oba’s dialogue with the Praise-Singer remains loaded with proverbs that are particular to the villagers of Oyo. Readers who are unfamiliar with this society will have difficulty understanding the full meaning of this section. Therefore, it is possible to say that the first act of *Death and the King’s Horseman* is designed to divide readers into insiders (people of Oyo) and outsiders (foreign audiences). Soyinka expects that his play is read and processed differently by different interpretive communities. Fiona McLaughlin agrees that “language can, in fact, have a very profound effect on the ways in which people identify themselves”, and she also proposes that “within the African context” language may “often, but certainly not always, be considered a strong correlate of ethnicity” (13). According to their differing ethnographic background, non-Yoruba readers experience a division that challenges their understanding of language. Although the act is written in a vernacular that is familiar to them, the unfamiliar pairing of words renders the text incomprehensible for English-speaking

²³ Craig McLuckie clarifies that “Olohun-iyó” (Soyinka *DKH* 9) is the Praise-Singer’s Yoruba name (147).

²⁴ Here, I return to Stanley Fish’s concept of interpretive communities, which consist of interlocutors who recognize meaning because of the similarities in the way they process information. These strategies help shape a person’s response to a work according to the conventions of his or her specific interpretive community. Soyinka demonstrates his understanding of interpretive communities and uses it to his advantage in the first act of his play.

interpreters. Hence, the English language is no longer exclusively available to English-speaking consumers.

However, the comparisons to Shakespeare no doubt complicate Soyinka's status as a writer championing the African voice.²⁵ Derek Wright states that critics have at times accused Soyinka of relying "too heavily" on "Western notions and forms" (27) while Appiah describes Soyinka as the "man of European letters" (110). Similarly, Tanure Ojaide states that, when teaching Soyinka's play to Western classrooms, students tend to see "everything in light of Shakespeare" (116). Hence, does adopting a Shakespearean poetic form detract from any sense of Africaness, or does it become Soyinka's way of creating a contemporary style of drama? Moreover, does Soyinka's incorporation of Shakespearean style fuel the reductionist reading of his play as a 'clash of cultures'? Ojaide clarifies that the, "double heritage of African and Western dramatic traditions" (116) presents the play as a hybrid text, a form of literature that exhibits literary practices from multiple sources. Philip Brockbank comments on the Shakespearean likeness in Soyinka's work by observing, "as in the plays of Shakespeare (and Soyinka) the language makes covert connections between one range of values and another, and between the fabulous event and the ordinariness of human experience" (81). In other words, Brockband underlines how both authors commonly utilize language as a means of creating profound artistic experience through a medium that privileges the human experience. Not only does language encompass properties that provide opportunities for artistic expression, but it also becomes an experience entirely unique to the speaker. In essence, Soyinka champions a discourse that, in Ngugi's words, is "able to carry the weight of

²⁵ Soyinka completed his undergraduate education in English at the University of Leeds under Professor Wilson Knight, a prolific Shakespearean scholar, who later became his mentor (Ojaide 116).

[the] African experience” (8) and therefore qualifies as a ‘New English’, that is, a type of discourse that is able to verbalize African consciousness.

The conversation at the beginning of the first act illustrates characteristics of the call and response form, a type of engagement that comes to life when heard out loud. It is important to remember that Soyinka has chosen to tell the tale of the Yoruba town in the shape of a play, and that plays illustrate their maximum effect when they are performed as opposed to read. Traditionally, African cultural productions are performed in an oral medium. Abiola Irele explains in “Orality, Literacy and African Literature” that oral traditions have “come to be implicated in the process of transformation of the function of literature and in the preoccupation with the formal means of giving voice to the African assertion” (78). This artistic strategy supports the expansion of African subjectivity because it champions techniques that are not concentrated in the European heritage. The call and response performance becomes a type of verbal expression that appeals to the audience’s auditory sensibilities, “at least in the African context” (Irele “Orality” 79). Irele asserts that orality highlights “a sensitivity to language” (80) since it not only stimulates a semantic engagement with the text but it also appeals to the sensory interpretations of the audience. Oral speech leaves impressions and relies heavily on the way a person responds to the to the accents or intonations of the sounds being produced. Orality is thus a “stylized mode of language” (Irele 80), an expressive medium that encourages proverbial speech. Elesin and the Praise-Singer’s conversation allows Soyinka to probe deeper into the Yoruba cosmos and lay the groundwork for the metaphysical confrontation in his play. The way Soyinka chooses to open his play resonates with an old tale, one that is passed on to a new generation of listeners. Harold

Schenb notes that “performance gives images their context, and gives the members of the audience a ritual experience that bridges past and present, shaping their contemporary lives” (97). The sights and sounds associated with Elesin portray him as a larger-than-life individual and thus mythologize this character.

Throughout the first act, Elesin’s interactions with the townspeople present him as an electric character, often drawing crowds with his magnetic energy. His unique position as the king’s horseman provides him the opportunity to inhabit a special status in the Yoruba universe. But what guarantees his reputation is the fulfillment of the ritual suicide that accompanies his role as the alafin’s right-hand man. At the market, members of the community are anxious to learn if Elesin exudes the emotional readiness to face death. Iyaloja, whom Soyinka characterizes as the “‘Mother’ of the market” (*DKH* 8), detects inklings of hesitation in the man’s behaviors. Elesin Oba’s earthly desires have reached the ears of the town’s senior members who now question his willingness to uphold the traditions of their ancestors. The result is a dynamic exchange where Elesin simultaneously reaffirms his compliance with the sacrificial ritual while unintentionally confirming his weakness and, thus, foreshadowing his eventual inability to die. Elesin formulates the tale of the Not-I bird, a parable that commences as a dialogue between him and the Praise-Singer, who also suspects traces of reluctance in the horseman’s character but the exchange ultimately culminates in a soliloquy that harkens back to Shakespearean tragedy. Elesin starts by noting the ubiquity of death:

Death came calling.

Who does not know his rasp of reeds?

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. (Soyinka *DKH* 11-12)

The threnodic lyrics reveal that death has solicited many people in Oyo since the passing of the monarch. From the farmer to the courtesan, each has replied ‘Not I’, hoping to guide death to the rightful custodian of the ritual. Elesin’s monologue, from a stylistic perspective, incorporates Shakespearean hallmarks such as the incorporation of blank verse. The sequence of unrhymed iambic pentameter lines is often reserved for Shakespeare’s heroes. By switching from prose to blank verse, Elesin elevates himself from man to sacrificial figure. He indulges in the endless accolades attributed to a person of his standing and celebrates himself as a king’s horseman. For all his self-aggrandizing expressions, hints of apprehension seep into his diction and reveal a man who is not quite prepared to dismiss his life as a man of many pleasures. Joan Hepburn notes that Elesin’s enumeration of death-fearing characters is meant to elevate himself through a “praise song” (183) that highlights his capacity to face death. She adds, “[t]he song helps to establish the height from which Elesin falls” (183). Similarly, Ogaga Ifowodo notes, “[t]he sheer metaphysical exuberance of Elesin’s language, indeed the pure poetry of his speech and ritual dance ... betrays his death anxiety” (36) and thus Elesin uses language to mask his trepidations concerning his fate. Elesin has risen beyond his social standing and presents the potential to rival Ogun himself, which in turn threatens to disrupt the

balance of the Yoruba cosmos. When Elesin delivers “Who does not know his rasp of reeds,” he means to assert that death is a concept that many fear. Ironically, it is Elesin who perhaps fears death the most. Elesin’s question creates a paradoxical situation where the protagonist tries to expose to universal fear of death in an attempt to camouflage his own apprehensions to face his obligation to die. He closes his reflections by proclaiming:

Ah, companions of this living world
What a thing this is, that even those
We call immortal
Should fear to die. (Soyinka *DKH* 13)

The anxieties accompanying the looming presence of death are never far from Elesin’s mind, especially after the passing of his king. Interestingly, a shift in pronouns proposes that the death is not exclusive to Elesin but must be shared by members of his community. By moving from the first person singular ‘I’ to the first person plural pronoun ‘We’, Elesin tries to share some of the expectations associated with his mandate. He certainly includes himself as an “immortal” who “should fear to die” as he seems unprepared to depart from his physical body to join his leader in the afterlife. Moreover, Elesin appeals to his neighbours through affective strategies that might compel them to understand his hesitations to forfeit his earthly existence as he reminds everyone (both the people of Oyo as well as the audience) that death is a universal fear. The impact of Elesin’s words creates a different order of narration. Elesin chooses to shape his story of the Not-I bird by eliciting linguistic techniques that not only create the contextual background for his riddle but that also depict him as a master of

language. Speaking “like a born raconteur” (Soyinka *DKH* 11), he becomes complicit in his own mythologizing.

Elesin Oba is not the only character that demonstrates a thorough understanding of the English language. The young girls at the market prove themselves to be equally well-versed in the vernacular of the colonizer. In Act III, the girls perform a scene that highlights the dynamics of colonial mimicry. In order to replicate the speech patterns of the English, the girls must present a thorough understanding of the English language but they must also demonstrate a deep understanding of British culture. In the following example, they exhibit their attentiveness to the ways of the British:

GIRLS

-Your invitation card please?

-Who are you? Have we been introduced?

-And who did you say you were?

-Sorry, I didn't quite catch your name.

-May I take your hat?

-If you insist. May I take yours? (Exchanging the policeman's hats)

-How very kind of you.

-Not at all. Won't you sit down?

-After you.

-Oh no.

-I insist.

-You're most gracious. (Soyinka *DKH* 37-38)

In this amusing sequence, the chorus of girls simulates the artificiality of English social rhetoric. The stage directions inform the readers that the girls adopt an “‘English’ accent” and begin “play-acting to one another” (Soyinka *DKH* 37). First, the girls reproduce the arrival of elite guests at a wedding party and they each take turns at playing the role of the accommodating hostess. Their interpretation of English etiquette reveals that the girls have often observed this scenario among British characters. The pompous introductions and the incessant attempts to uphold social decorum no doubt strike the Yoruba women as humorous practices. In this passage, the exchanges reside between what Homi Bhabha calls “mimicry and mockery,” that is, “where reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing of its disciplinary double” (123). Bhabha explains that “mimicry repeats rather than re-presents” (125) the original source. He adds, “mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (122). In other words, the reproductions of colonial attitudes are never meant to be identical to the original source.

Bhabha claims that mimicry ultimately becomes a “menace” because it demonstrates a comprehensive awareness of the colonial object by appropriating its discourse. In the passage above, the satirical undertone suggests that the girls are not only familiar with the behaviors of the English but that they are able to reproduce them as well. Even the women of the town are impressed by the girls’ skillful replications of the colonizer’s speech. They ponder, “Did you

see how they mimicked the white man?” and later add, “[t]he voices exactly” (Soyinka *DKH* 39). Olakunle George expresses that the schoolgirls “can be read as a budding avant-garde of sorts, defending the dignity of the community against the alien colonial structure” (216). The women ask the girls “Do they teach you all that at school?” (Soyinka *DKH* 39) exposing how colonial influences have no doubt been integrated in the school systems. This new generation of Yoruba demonstrates that although they may have been partially “Anglicized” (Bhabha 128) through a new colonial education system, they are not English. Mimicry becomes an exercise in reforming methods of representation that exhibit a strong understanding of the colonizer’s motivations. Bhabha explains though that, “in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (122), emphasizing that the repetition of foreign habits should never aim for exact replication.

Not only do the girls satirize the social conventions that the British have imported to Oyo, but they also reveal certain attitudes that the foreigners have expressed in regards to the natives. One girl asks “And how do you find the place?” to which another responds, “The natives are alright” (Soyinka *DKH* 38). Soon, they enumerate impressions the colonizers might attribute to the townspeople. One suggests that the native appear a “bit restless” as another girl adds that perhaps some might even be “difficult” (Soyinka *DKH* 38). However, the group describes Amusa, who is sergeant in Oyo, as a “faithful ox” (Soyinka 38).²⁶ The animalistic and primitive descriptions are typical characteristics British colonizers attribute to

²⁶ In the play, Amusa is a character that demonstrates the potential of becoming an ally to the British colonizers. In fact, it is Amusa who notifies Pilkings that Elesin is about to follow through with the ritual, which then gives the British officer enough time to intervene. Craig McLuckie even qualifies him as a “colonial representative” (153) since as a local officer, he must ensure the wellbeing of his town and report back to the British. For these reasons, the daughters of the market women portray him as a potential accomplice for the colonial forces.

African people, which the girls understand very well. Then, one girl states that apart from Amusa, “Mostly of course they are liars/ Never known a native to tell the truth” (Soyinka *DKH* 38). These comments expose how the British envoys demonstrate a distrust of the indigenous group, which the Yoruba are perfectly aware of. Despite the many humorous exchanges, the performance relays an underlying atmosphere of fear of the Other. The mimetic structure of the passage outlines a “double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (Bhabha 116). The result is a form of hybrid identity that is “at once a mode of appropriation and of resistance, from the disciplines to the desiring” (Bhabha 1181). Homi Bhabha suggests that mimicry is a “metonymic strategy” (1181) that exposes the resistance to the colonial power. Bhabha adds that mimicry creates a “hybrid” identity and helps the preservation of the “self” (Bhabha 1181). Mimicry ultimately shows an incomplete process of mental colonization since the girls are able to recognize the behaviors of the colonizers, reproduce them, but still maintain their ties to their belief systems.

The insertion of Nigerian Pidgin English is another significant dialectical space that fosters the potential for a linguistic confrontation. According to Bernard Mafeni, a pidgin arises as “a product of the process of urbanization, while its origins lie in the early contacts between Africans and Europeans” (98). With the importation of the English vernacular in Nigerian societies, the impact of British occupation becomes progressively noticeable, especially in the ways colonizer and colonized are forced to communicate. Thus, pidgin developed from “the urgent communication needs of the contact between the visiting Europeans (in the end the English) and the multi-lingual Nigerian hosts” (Elugbe and Omamor 21). As a result, Nigerian Pidgin evolves from the necessity to establish a new language that

could be understood by both European colonizers and Nigerian natives. In accordance with its definition, Pidgin English is “a language containing lexical and other features from two or more languages, characteristically with simplified grammar and a smaller vocabulary than the languages from which it is derived, used for communication between people not having a common language; a lingua franca” (OED).²⁷ In essence, Pidgin English is a combination of languages; a dialogue between numerous forms of communication to produce a new synthesized discourse that facilitates the production of meaning. In order to remain accessible to interlocutors, pidgin produces partial morphological changes to the original language, hence some words are recognizable to the English reading individual while others contain localized dialects. However, a second definition highlights Pidgin English’s “depreciative” quality, characterizing it as “a simplified, imperfect, or debased form of English” (OED).²⁸ That is, pidgin lacks many of the grammatical and syntactical refinement of its original language. Tony Obilade confirms that pidgin is often categorized as a “trade jargon” or a “makeshift language” (433). Similarly, Enzenwa-Ohaeto reveals that “issues of domination and appendage, [and] exploitation” created a “political focus in areas in which Pidgin was a medium of communication” and that ultimately, “the development of the language was affected by several other sociocultural factors” (69). Indeed, Pidgin becomes a malleable social and cultural space that reveals the climate of the region that speaks the language. Obilade also investigates the importance of considering pidgin as a “foregrounded element” (434), that is, a component that appears as a “prominent” factor to help achieve a “deeper meaning beyond the ‘normal’ linguistic reading” (434). This means that, for Obilade, Pidgin

²⁷ Definition number 2 of pidgin from the Oxford English Dictionary.

²⁸ Definition C1. of pidgin from the Oxford English Dictionary.

English as a language presents a space for transition and morphological change in linguistics. Therefore, pidgin is qualified as “a simplified or hybrid form of something” (OED).²⁹ It is precisely the hybrid characteristic of pidgin that allows Soyinka to use it as an important tool depicting a society in transition.

In the play, Amusa is one of the characters whose dialogue is pidginized. The sergeant is a character whose subjectivity, just like his language, is undergoing a hybrid shift. Readers learn that Amusa harbors allegiances to both the Yoruba culture as well as the British rulers. When Simon Pilkings and his wife Jane prepare themselves to go to a ball wearing traditional Yoruba attire, Amusa, although not entirely part of the Yoruba tribe, recoils from this vision and implores his supervisor to retire the Yoruba dress in an attempt to not offend any natives:

PILKINGS: What the hell is the matter with you man!

JANE: Your costume darling. Our fancy dress.

PILKINGS: Oh hell, I'd forgotten all about that. (Lifts the face masks over his head showing his face. His wife follows suit.)

JANE: I think you've shocked his big pagan heart bless him.

PILKINGS: Nonsense he's a Moslem. Come on Amusa, you don't believe in all this nonsense do you? I thought you were a good Moselm.

AMUSA: Mista Pirinkin, I beg you sir, what you think you do with that dress? It belong to dead cult not for human being.

²⁹ Definition C2. of pidgin from the Oxford English Dictionary.

PILKINGS: Oh Amusa, what a let down you are. I swear by you at the club you know-
thank God for Amusa, he doesn't believe in any mumbo-jumbo. And now look at
you!

AMUSA: Mista Pirinkin, I beg you, take it off. It is not good for man like you to touch
that cloth. (Soyinka *DKH* 24)

In contrast to Jane and Simon's dialogue, Amusa's speech demonstrates a simple diction and poor syntax. He fuses words and distorts others, all traits that are characteristic of Nigerian Pidgin. Of course, the most noticeable change is the mispronunciation of Mr. Pilkings, which Amusa pronounces "Mista Pirinkin." The grammatical and stylistic differences between Pilking's language and Amusa's responses create a sociolinguistic gap between the characters. Amusa's simplified speech, although entirely comprehensible, lacks the refinements of his British counterparts. Ezenwa-Ohaeto reveals, "[t]he most prominent sociocultural factor was the fact that Pidgin was associated with a lower social status, which aided in the social stratification of the people who used it" (69). Indeed, Amusa's diction appears unsophisticated and gives him the illusion of not being able to speak correct English. Some scholars note that pidgin resembles the speech produced by the "early efforts of children" (Todd 27).³⁰ The attitude surrounding the use of pidgin reveals a sociolinguistic class structure in which Nigerian Pidgin English is ranked lower than Standard English in the linguistic hierarchies. For example, Abioseh Michael Porter describes that some "educationist

³⁰ The "baby-talk theory" was one of the first approaches sociolinguists used to describe the stylistic qualities of pidgin. In his book *Pidgins and Creoles*, Loreto Todd surveys some of the earliest attitudes towards this new form of language. In its genesis, pidgin presents "imperfect mastery of a language which is in its initial stage, in the child with its first language and in the grown-up with a second language learnt by imperfect methods, leads to a superficial knowledge of the most indispensable words, with total disregard of grammar" (Jameson qtd. in Todd 29).

and other literates still snobbishly and hypocritically condemn the use of Pidgin, claiming that it leads children to make poor use of the ‘Queen’s English’ (63). These sentiments reveal the importance of language in establishing the speaker’s status in society. As Porter’s observations suggest, straying from English as a global vernacular limits the subject from being seen as an intellectual interlocutor. Therefore, there are instances of colonial rule within language. In other words, language becomes a site where the tensions between colonizer and colonized become apparent.

However, the use of Pidgin as a form of communication in postcolonial narratives transcends the debate surrounding language as an indicator of the speaker’s social status. In fact, this dialect has “made a noticeable linguistic advance in spite of the stigma that has often been attached to its use, especially in elitist circles” (Porter 63). Indeed, Pidgin has emerged from its unfavorable reputation to hold a new legitimate place in the development of culture. As Enzenwa-Ohaeto explains, “the Pidgin language provide[s] an appropriate medium for this exploitation of oral traditions in poetry, for it acts as a bridge between the orality of verbal communication and the formality of the written word” (69). This property demonstrates that Pidgin English incorporates many components of both written and spoken language and elevates Pidgin’s global reputation to an adaptable of progressive language. One scholar who champions the use of Pidgin English is Emeka Okeke-Ezigbo. He states that Pidgin is a “practical, viable, flexible language distilled in the alembic of our native sensibility and human experience. This lusty language, which transcends our geographical and political boundaries grows daily before our eyes” (34). Okeke-Ezigbo’s description of the flexibility of language is precisely the advantage Pidgin English has for its speakers. That is, pidgin can

conserve cultural essences while remaining accessible to British non-speakers because of its incorporation of English. Therefore, the next leap is to consider Pidgin as a hybrid entity, a medium that becomes a fusion of many forms of communication. Readers who now read the exchange between Amusa, Jane, and Simon can observe that in fact Pidgin is a vernacular that conveniently expresses the speaker's message but also demonstrates a culture bond with Yoruba society.

Interestingly, another factor that demonstrates language's hybrid quality in postcolonial texts is variations in the production of meaning. For example, when Pilkings finds Amusa's note on Elesin's ritual suicide, Jane and Simon Pilkings struggle with Amusa's account of the events:

PILKINGS: Amusa's report. Listen. 'I have to report that it come to my information that one prominent chief, namely, the Elesin Oba, is to commit death tonight as a result of native custom. Because this is criminal offence I await further instruction at the office. Sergeant Amusa.'

(Jane comes out onto the verandah while he is reading.)

JANE: Did I hear you say commit death?

PILKINGS: Obviously he means murder.

JANE: You mean ritual murder?

PILKINGS: Must be. You think you've stamped it all out but it's always lurking under the surface somewhere. (Soyinka *DKH* 26)

In this passage, Elesin's cultural duty is described in many ways. Amusa reports that Elesin will "commit death" while Pilkings insists on correcting Amusa because he believes that

Elesin is in fact carrying out a “murder.” Jane then adds onto Simon’s original observation by stating that Elesin’s action is in fact a “ritual murder.” Although these different descriptions are unified by the same event, they produce multiple meanings. As suggested earlier by Emeka Okeke-Ezigbo, language’s “flexibility” (34) allows it to become a vast site for the production of knowledge. The three characters demonstrate their respective positions to Elesin’s impending death through their use of language. These contrasting levels of expression compose a spectrum of references for the upcoming sacred funeral rites. When Pilkings qualifies Elesin’s sacrificial responsibility as a murder,³¹ he locates the Yoruba tradition in “system of signification” that is outside the Yoruba cosmos and makes it “accountable to an alien juridical discourse” (Msiska 59). As such, patterns of communication display each individual’s cultural allegiance to their own set of beliefs.

Language encompasses deceptive properties that allows the speaker to manipulate words. This occurs in the play when Simon Pilkings and Elesin Oba disagree on the meaning of the terms “peace” and “quiet”:

PILKINGS: It is a beautiful night.

ELESIN: Is that so?

PILKINGS: The light on the leaves, the peace of the night...

ELESIN: The night is not at peace, District Officer.

PILKINGS: No? I would have said it was. You know, quiet...

³¹ According to definition A.a. of the Oxford English Dictionary, a murder is “[t]he deliberate and unlawful killing of a human being, esp. in a premeditated manner; (*Law*) criminal homicide with malice aforethought.” When Simon Pilkings refers to the ritual as a murder, he contaminates the Yoruba belief system with the governing laws of the British. This act of cultural comparativism hinders the possibility of extending an imaginative bridge between the Pilkings and the Yoruba characters.

ELESIN: And does quiet mean peace for you?

PILKINGS: Well, nearly the same thing. Naturally there is a subtle difference...

(Soyinka 61)

Pilkings' last response reveals his surprise to being corrected by a native Yoruba man whose mother tongue is not English. Elesin's mastery of the English vernacular opens the possibility of linguistic exchanges becoming an intellectual space for negotiating power relations between the British imperialists and African natives. This occurrence reveals the native's understanding of the colonizer's language but it also demonstrates the more political and social uses of English as a tool of oppression. By understanding the structure of the foreigner's discourse and demonstrating a better understanding of it, Elesin foregrounds his position as an intellectually superior character while showing his ability to recognize and understand an alien language without falling victim to it. Although the sequence of exchanges seems quick and insubstantial, it reveals the power relations between the colonizer and the colonized. Pilkings tries to regain his position of superiority by replying that "quiet" and "peace" only have a "subtle difference" and that they mean "nearly the same thing" (Soyinka *DKH* 61). He justifies his previous comments to demonstrate that his understanding of the English language is just as thorough as Elesin's. Therefore the power of language doesn't belong to the speaker, but resides in the mode of interpretation.

When Olunde arrives to bury his father, Jane believes she is welcoming a man reformed by his Western education in England. During their conversation, Jane realizes that Olunde's views concerning his father's suicide are rooted in Yoruba logic and, for him, the ritual remains an important rite of passage for his people. Soyinka introduces a parallel story

of a captain having to commit suicide in order to save the lives of his fellow compatriots. When his doomed ship, fraught with explosives, roams dangerously close to the harbour, the captain realizes that he must find a way to eliminate the threat. Choosing to stay behind to ignite the fuse to the explosive, the captain sacrifices his life for the well-being of the nearby town. As Jane narrates the sequence of events to Olunde, she fails to recognize the similarities of her story to the events taking place in Oyo:

JANE (shrugs): I don't know much about it. Only that there was no other way to save lives. No time to devise anything else. The captain took the decision and carried it out.

OLUNDE: Yes ... I quite believe it. I met men like that in England.

JANE: Oh just look at me! Fancy welcoming you back with such morbid news. Stale too. It was at least six months ago.

OLUNDE: I don't find it morbid at all. I find it rather inspiring. It is an affirmative commentary on life.

JANE: What is?

OLUNDE: That captain's self-sacrifice.

JANE: Nonsense. Life should never be thrown deliberately away.

OLUNDE: And the innocent people round the harbour?

JANE: Oh, how does one know? The whole thing was probably exaggerated anyway.

(Soyinka *DKH* 51)

Of course, in this instance, readers are aware that the captain's self-sacrifice is meant to contrast Elesin's ritual suicide and that both characters underline the importance of maintaining their community's safety. Ironically, Jane's ambivalent tone suggests that she is blind to the resemblance between the captain's story and Elesin's fate. She casually states that "there was no other way" to save the city and that there was "no time" for any alternatives, but soon apologizes for burdening Olunde with this sinister news (Soyinka *DKH* 51). The young man's response however, is a crucial indicator regarding his affiliation to his origins. Finding the captain's actions inspiring, Olunde proclaims that the suicide is in fact "an affirmative commentary on life" (Soyinka *DKH* 51). Here, Soyinka celebrates Ogun's "humane but restorative justice" (Soyinka *Myth* 141), since it is a force that seeks to maintain balance in the universe. In essence, the termination of physical life, as in the case of the captain, does not necessarily end his spiritual life. That is, the contribution he has made by surrendering his life ensures the prosperity of many others. The captain encompasses many Ogunian traits despite his colonial heritage and his "ethical doctrine and sympathy" (Soyinka *Myth* 141) for the plight of others links him closer to the values of the Yoruba than Jane might perceive.³²

In an attempt to highlight the likeness of these two communities, Soyinka uses "imaginative bridges" as a key strategy to "contrast the rich communal wisdom of the Yoruba

³² It is important to remember that in his Author's Note, Soyinka informs his audience that although the play "is based on events which took place in Oyo, ancient Yoruba city of Nigeria, in 1946," the playwright has opted to change the setting of his play. He states that for "minor reasons of dramaturgy," he has set his play back "two or three years" (*DKH* 5). This means that the play would coincide with the unfolding of the Second World War, a conflict that England fought as well. During the war, England sent thousands of young men to fight for the values of their country and to reestablish the safety of Europe. Wole Ogundele states that in the conversation between Jane and the young medical student, the latter "manages to reveal what he has learned from British conduct in war: moral courage on the part of a leadership that can unhesitatingly sacrifice itself on behalf of society when that society's survival is at risk" (57). Hence, the actions of the ship's captain, Elesin's suicide and the deployment of soldiers during World War Two all represent the crucial role sacrifice plays in the maintenance of societal peace.

proverbial idiom with the tiny vocabulary of skepticism and secularity by Jane and Pilkings” (Booth 533). Ironically, Booth notes that Soyinka’s particular description of Jane presents a “(deliberate) thinness of treatment of the Europeans” (533). As a result, readers might sense that “the white characters are being perfunctorily manipulated by the playwright” (Booth 533), which in turn, creates a feeling of doubt with regards to the representations of the British characters. In the exchange between Jane and Olunde, spectators might deduct that Jane’s reactions might be manufactured by Soyinka for maximum theatrical effect. In truth, Jane’s inability to notice the similarities between the captain and Elesin’s lives makes her seem “imperceptive” (Booth 534). Perhaps Jane’s most honest comment comes as a response to Olunde’s implicit statement that the customs and traditions that he valued in Oyo have followed him throughout his travels to Europe. Here she confesses, “Simon and I agree that we never really knew what you left with” (Soyinka *DKH* 54), acknowledging that cultural affiliations cannot be dismissed.

So far, Soyinka has used language to demonstrate each character’s affiliation to the colonial forces. The different manipulations of English reveal a profound skepticism on the part of many indigenous characters who acknowledge the presence of British relations but aim to maintain a discourse that privileges Yoruba realities. Part of Soyinka’s project is to not only highlight the natives’ changing attitudes through verbal language but to demonstrate a cultural transition through other forms of engagement. In native songs, ritual dances, and physical expressions, the tragic elements of Soyinka’s text are brought to light. This polyphony of sounds reveals that the Yoruba people do not represent a homogenous group with equal world-views. While some characters demonstrate their deep understanding of the colonial rhetoric,

others resist incorporating alternative discourses and cling tightly to their world-views. By observing forms of communication that highlight Yoruba subjectivity, readers can observe how this dynamic community had already been in the process of fundamental shifts in ideology long before the arrival of the colonizer.

Chapter 3

Masks, Music and the Language of Transition

Neither kings nor gods are exempt from the playwright's imaginative and ethical scrutiny, for the poet knows that the gods and sanctities of human piety and government are the creation of the human imagination.

(Philip Brockbank, "Tragic Ritual form Aeschylus to Soyinka")

Death and the King's Horseman can be fully realized only through an evocation of music from the abyss of transition.

(Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*)

Tracking the many transformations of language in *Death and the King's Horseman* exposes changing attitudes among the characters of the play. Prior to the arrival of Jane and Simon Pilkings, the people of Oyo had already begun to incorporate alternative linguistic methods in their traditional ways of communication. The appropriation of English in the Yoruba world, for example, reflects Soyinka's efforts to resist a "clash of cultures" when reading the Yoruba and English world against and along one another. As a skilled orator and master of the English language, Elesin reveals himself to be open to the literary practices of the British, which introduces the possibility of him being open to alternative ways of thinking as well. Verbal speech then is not the only indicator that presents this shift in the Yoruba consciousness, but music and dance also serve as mediums to communicate the events of the town.

For Soyinka, music is an important element in the formation of tragedy. He believes that the Yoruba practice music in a way that differs from the methods of the British colonizers. He states, “[t]he European concept of music does not fully illuminate the relationship of music to ritual and drama among the Yoruba” (*Myth* 147). In Yoruba tragedy, music provides supplementary forms of communicating the essence of the drama in a manner that elevates Yoruba principles. In *Myth, Literature and the African World*, he explains that during the “charged climactic moments of the tragic rites,” music emerges as the “sole art form which can contain tragic reality” (146-7). The true “embodiment of the tragic spirit” resides in music and allows Soyinka to develop the threnodic notes of his play (Soyinka *Myth* 147). The melodies that accompany the sacrificial customs of the Yoruba are exclusive to members of this society and mark important moments in the ritual. After having spent four years in medical school in Europe, Olunde still recognizes the significance of the playing of the drums:

OLUNDE: Listen! Come outside. You can’t hear anything against that music.

JANE: What is it?

OLUNDE: The drums. Can you hear the change? Listen.

(The drums come over, still distant but more distinct. There is a change of rhythm, it rises to a crescendo and then, suddenly, it is cut off. After a silence, a new beat begins, slow and resonant.)

There. It’s all over.

JANE: You mean he’s.....

OLUNDE: Yes Mrs Pilkings, my father is dead. His will-power has always been

enormous; I know he is dead. (Soyinka *DKH* 55)

According to the stage directions, the initial beating of the drums marks the end of Elesin's life in the realm of the living. After a brief pause, a new pattern of reverberations begins, suggesting the beginning of the horseman's life in the realm of the ancestors. Inspired by the "slow and resonant" rhythm, Olunde now believes that his father has upheld his commitment to death and has transitioned to his final destination alongside his king. The harmonies produced by the drums are intelligible only to those who take notice in the variations of sound. Readers can presume that different melodies are composed for unique events, each presenting rhythmical particularities that are limited to Yoruba listeners.

The acoustics of the drums, however, divulge inconsistencies among certain characters that have difficulty deciphering the meaning of each composition. Joseph, the Pilkings's houseboy, who has recently converted to Christianity,³³ appears confused when trying to understand the meaning behind the tune. Earlier, when Jane asks him if he can make out the significance of the drums, he responds rather ambiguously:

JANE: ... Listen Joseph, just tell me this. Is that drumming connecting 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. (Soyinka *DKH* 30)

Here, Joseph "cannot tell whether the chief is living or dead" (Izevbaye 144), and the moment of transition is obscured by a lack of interpretive references. Jane suspects that the music is

³³ We learn through Simon Pilkings that Joseph had converted to Christianity two years prior to the events in the play.

“connect[ed] with dying” but Joseph is unable to give a conclusive explanation. Readers might deduce that Joseph’s inclination towards Western ideologies (such as his conversion to Christianity) has caused him to drift from his roots. Choosing to cultivate his Eurocentric beliefs, Joseph has forgotten the music of his ancestors.

To understand Yoruba music is to be immersed in Yoruba ritual. Soyinka asserts, “[t]he nature of Yoruba music is intensively the nature of its language and poetry, highly charged, symbolic, mythembyronic” (*Myth* 147). Music becomes a crucial means of communication, a language in itself. Soyinka even adds that it is “unmusical” to “separate Yoruba musical form from myth and poetry” (*Myth* 147). This underscores that music is always present in verbal dialogue; every word, every utterance is always carried into speech by the speaker’s intonations. The music produced by the interlocutor’s lips has an impact on each syllable and infuses it with a distinct sense of Yoruba sensitivity. Hence, music and words cannot be isolated from each other. Soyinka underlines this last point when he discloses, “[l]anguage therefore is not a barrier to the profound universality of music but a cohesive dimension and clarification of the willfully independent art-form which we label music” (*Myth* 147). Music is the language that produces the tragic effects describing Elesin’s obligation to his king. The drums in particular become the refrain of the ritual suicide, chiming in to create the threnodic undercurrents of the play.

Just like spoken language, music also highlights the state of transition of the Yoruba people. Both Olunde and Joseph hear the drums, but neither character actually registers the right message. Olunde, asserting that the pause in between each session signifies his father’s

passing, wishes to present himself as a figure returning to his origins and who is unaffected by the worldview of the Europeans. Readers quickly realize that Elesin has not died but has in fact been interrupted by Pilkings and his men, who judge his sacrifice to be immoral and unnecessary. When Olunde proclaims that the sound of the drums is undoubtedly the death song signaling his father's suicide, he is in fact mistaken. Similarly, Joseph, who is "really mix[ed] up" by the loud noises (Soyinka *DKH* 30), cannot properly distinguish the true meaning of the beating drums. Making no effort to conceal his confusion, Joseph appears out of tune with the significance of the ritual drums. This way, Soyinka exposes characters that diverge from standard interpretations of their community's traditions. These ideological transformations are the result of both changing worldviews but also the reception of foreign influences. Olunde's British education and Joseph's religious awakening have added another dimension to the collective consciousness of the Yoruba people. Through their inability to properly identify the true meaning of the drums, they both manifest the dynamic sensibilities of the people of Oyo. Although the ritual has not yet undergone change, the ritual followers have all demonstrated a shift in their perceptions of ritual discourse.

Outlined in his theory of funerals of immolation, Soyinka emphasizes the role of music guiding individuals through the passages of each Yoruba realm. He writes,

In cult funerals, the circle of initiate mourners, an ageless swaying grove of dark pines, raises a chant around a mortar of fire, and words are taken back to their roots, to their original poetic sources when fusion was total and the movement of words was the very passage of music and the dance of images. (*Myth* 147)

Soyinka dissects the ontological terms of language by suggesting that when a word is broken down into its essence, its “poetic sources” demonstrate a “fusion” of “movements” that allows it to regenerate itself in both music and dance. Here, the author proposes that words, music and dance are inextricably linked and that they move through each other, forming a style of communication that mirrors the Yoruba beliefs of transition. The regenerative qualities of the ritual renew the linguistic architecture of Yoruba communication, just as it replenishes the next generation with the protection of ritual. As rituals allow words to be “taken back to their roots,” it also permits the faithful followers to return to the origins of the Yoruba mind. In Soyinka’s work, every character presents an opportunity for language, and so every character becomes language. The “fusion” evoked by Soyinka demonstrates the inextricability of threnodic language from the tragic figures. “[T]he movement of words” creates a current facilitating the transition of souls into spiritual entities. Music fills the spaces in the realms of the living, dead and the unborn to become the sound of transitional memory. In addition, the elegiac melodies of the Yoruba bridge the metaphorical abyss and the “stage of transition” (*Myth* 149). Music encompasses fundamental Ogunian³⁴ characteristics because it is a means of action:

It is this experience that the modern tragic dramatist recreates through the medium of physical contemporary action, reflecting emotions of the first active battle of the will

³⁴ In *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Wole Soyinka postulates many theories of the working of the metaphysical components of the Yoruba world. In the most famous chapter entitled “The fourth stage,” he expands on the notion of transitional abyss where entities move from the realm of the living, the dead and the unborn. In a footnote, he reasserts certain important factors of his two guiding deities. He reiterates that Ogun is the “God of creativity, guardian of the road, god of metallic lore and artistry. Explorer, hunter, god of war. Custodian of the sacred oath” and that Obatala is the “God of creation ... essence of the serene arts... The art of Obatala is thus essentially plastic and formal” (140). Soyinka’s concept of the “Fourth Stage” is integral to the development of the threnodic lyrics of the play. For Tejumola Olaniyan, the “Fourth Stage” is “Soyinka’s elaboration of a theory of tragic art rooted in an Africa sensibility” (46).

through the abyss of dissolution. Ogun is the first actor in that battle, and Yoruba tragic drama is the re-enactment of the cosmic conflict. (Soyinka, *Myth* 149-150)

Not only does music require an active form of engagement with those performing the sounds, but it also calls upon the tragic characters to reassert their will to perform the tragic ritual. Through music, Ogun demonstrates his affiliations to “the sacred oath”, that is, to the fulfillment of the human sacrifice. Returning to the prior example of Olunde and Joseph’s failure to identify the nature of the ancestral drumming, both characters expose the complexities of decoding music that is immersed in Ogunian sensibilities. Ato Quayson agrees that “[t]he music that surrounds the moment of ritual suicide is difficult to decipher. It is unclear to those who hear it from afar whether the drums are sounding the wedding or the death of a great chief” (225). Quayson explains that the state of transition is a liminal space, which provides insight on the nature of each character’s individual will and relationship towards his society. He asserts, “the sense of liminality does not remain solely at the level of language or non verbal cues (such as music)”, but it “impinges on the very psyche” of the individual (Quayson 225). The drumming that “constantly accompanies [Elesin] is only dramatic manifestations of a deeper cultural process of preparations” (Quayson 226). Music fills the background with harmonies of the Yoruba universe and “groom[s] [Elesin] psychologically for the ritual of transition” (Quayson 223). Does Olunde and Joseph’s inability to accurately interpret the banging of the drums suggest a changing of social attitudes? Is it possible that, despite insisting that he keep his “mind in [his] duties as the one who must perform the rites over [Elesin’s] body” (Soyinka *DKH* 57), Olunde has involuntarily begun a process of ideological transition? Music becomes a form of rhetoric that

communicates an individual's affiliation to the preservation of ritual ceremonies. Olunde and Joseph's lack of musical proficiency exposes them as characters who may have inadvertently digressed from Yoruba traditions.

In addition to music, traditional dance also encompasses components that serve in the celebration of the tragic festival. Izevbaye notes, the five act structure of the play alternates "between the world of the white men and the world of the Africans" and furthermore, "each of the first four Acts opens and closes with the action of dancing," marking the importance of ritual dance as a metonymic signifier (144). The Pilkings's 'masquerade' welcoming the British prince to the new colony is a crucial moment when the colonizer tampers with the procedural workings of the *egungun*. The incorporation of masks and ceremonial attire reinforces the distinctly African nature of rituals but many critics have also noted similar traditions in Western literature. Joan Hepburn discusses that the use of the *egungun* resembles "seventeenth-century European masque"³⁵ as a form of "dramatic technique" (178). No doubt, readers are expected to compare the Yoruba mask to the ones used in Shakespearean plays or even to the masks displayed in Commedia dell'arte.³⁶ What sets the Yoruba masks apart from their European counterparts is that the former invest in a ritual essence, that is, they are part of attire that asserts the presence of the Yoruba deities, which I will discuss further in this chapter.

³⁵ The stage directions inform the reader that at the masked party, the "white" music conductor "and his companions are dressed in seventeenth century European costume" (Soyinka *DKH* 45).

³⁶ This form of Italian theatre rose to prominence in the 16th century. Known for its improvisational style, performers often used masks to help with the characterization of their role. Later, masks helped to identify stock characters. Hence, masks used for specific roles often portrayed a similar aesthetics and were easily recognizable for audiences.

Act II opens with Simon and his wife dancing the tango, “wearing what is immediately apparent as some form of fancy-dress” (Soyinka 23). What is first described as a “fancy-dress” later turns out to be the traditional *egungun* wardrobe. When Jane and Simon slip on the indigenous costumes, they are quickly reprimanded by Amusa who, although having converted to Islam, still recognizes the importance of these artifacts in the Yoruba universe. Amusa pleads with the British envoy to remove the face-mask as well as the costume,

AMUSA: Mista Pirinkin, I beg you, take it off. Is not good for man like you to touch that cloth.

PILKINGS: Well, I’ve got it on. And what’s more Jane and I have bet on it we’re taking first prize at the ball. Now, if you can just pull yourself together and tell me what you wanted to see me about...

AMUSA: Sir, I cannot talk this matter to you in that dress. I not fit. (Soyinka *DKH* 24)

Pilkings demands to hear what Amusa has come to tell him, but the sergeant’s fearful demeanor adamantly asserts that he cannot enter into a conversation with a man posing in the uniform of the deceased. Amusa quickly clarifies, “it is a matter of death. How can man talk against death to person in uniform of death? Is like talking against government to person in uniform of police. Please sir, I go and come back” (Soyinka *DKH* 25). The officer’s comments expose that rituals (and all their articulations) are not simply part of the spiritual life of the Yoruba but that they form the basis for moral, social and religious systems. For Amusa, masks cannot be tampered with because they are a direct means for the dead to manifest their presence.

In *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Soyinka describes the significance of masks in the process of transition. He writes, “the masks alone occasionally suggest a correspondence to the chthonic realm and hint at the archetypes of transition” (155). As a means of communicating with the underworld, the facial disguises operate in ways that link the world of the living to the world of the dead. Masks embody transformative properties that allow the wearer to occupy a metaphorical transitory space where he is simultaneously in touch with the present as well as the past. In addition, Soyinka discloses,

The tragic mask, however, also functions from the same source as its music – from the archetypal essences whose language derives not from the place of physical reality or ancestral memory (the ancestor is no more than agent of medium), but from the numinous territory of transition into which the artist obtains fleeting glimpses by ritual, sacrifice and a patient submission or rational awareness to the moment where the fingers and the voice relate the symbolic language of the cosmos. (*Myth* 155)

This liminal territory creates the possibility for a form of artistic engagement that celebrates the fundamentals of the tragic ritual and acts as a reminder of the ubiquity of the *egungun* spirit. Masks, such as those used in European traditions,³⁷ are not designed for the purpose of performance. Instead, as representations of the “chthonic realm,” masks represent a way of being. By slipping on a mask, an individual steps into the skin of the ancestors; it is a reminder that the dead are capable of asserting their presence in the world of the living. In effect, masks do not hide the identity of the wearer but enhance his position as a member of a cosmic

³⁷ By masks used in European traditions, I mean Shakespearean masks as well as the ones used in Commedia dell'arte. See footnote 36.

family. Here, the spheres of the living and the departed meet. As part of the ritual ceremony, masks become the incarnation of the deceased. In this way, the dead share their voice in the Yoruba universe. Wearing the mask provides an opportunity for the music of the lamentation to exude from the lips of wearer.

Later in Act IV, enchanted by the exotic nature of the masks, the Pilkingses again reach for the Yoruba garments to enhance the costumes for their party. Once again, the stage directions prove vital as they describe the prince's amazement at the foreign costumes, which encourages Simon and Jane to "demonstrate the adaptations they have made to it, pulling down the mask to demonstrate how the *egungun* normally appears, then showing the various press-button controls they have innovated for the face flaps, the sleeves, etc." (Soyinka *DKH* 46). The aesthetic "adaptation" not only exposes the Pilkings's ambivalence towards the sacred objects, but it also reveals how the colonizer insists on finding ways to incorporate colonial authority in the environment of the colonized. For Pilkings, the modifications made to the Yoruba dress are for the sake of entertainment. The stage directions then describe how Jane and Simon "demonstrate the dance steps and the guttural sounds made by the *egungun*" which "entertained the Royal Party especially who lead the applause" (Soyinka *DKH* 46). By ridiculing Yoruba customs, the Pilkingses show themselves as colonial forces that do not comprehend the significance of the *egungun* for the Yoruba people. For his part, Amusa maintains a respectful position in regards to tampering with the sacred object of veneration. When faced with Pilkings, dressed in ceremonial costume, Amusa "stops dead" and lift his "[e]yes to the ceiling" to avoid this blasphemous sight (Soyinka *DKH* 49). When Pilkings urges Amusa to appease his reaction, the latter insists, "I cannot against death to dead cult.

This dress get power of dead” (Soyinka *DKH* 49).³⁸ Contrary to the use of masks in European theatre, masks in the Yoruba cosmos are not costumes but integral cultural components connected to Yoruba cosmology. For the Yoruba, the *egungun* mask facilitates communication between the realms of the dead to the world of the living. Fearing potential retribution from angered ancestors, Amusa “[keeps] his eyes in the ceiling throughout” (Soyinka *DKH* 49).

Olunde’s reaction to the Pilkings’s masquerade is less forthright than that of the town sergeant. After Amusa’s hasty departure, Olunde appears as “a figure emerg[ing] from the shadows, a young black man dressed in a sober western suit” (Soyinka *DKH* 49). He peers into the home, “trying to make out the figures of the dancers” (Soyinka *DKH* 49). Jane (who is draped in traditional Yoruba clothing) and Olunde (dressed in the professional attire of the white man) meet at the party for the first time in four years:

OLUNDE (emerging into the light): I didn’t mean to startle you madam. I am looking for the District Officer.

JANE: Wait a minute... don’t I know you? Yes, you are Olunde, the young man who...

(Soyinka *DKH* 50)

Unlike Amusa, Olunde initially approaches Jane with no apparent misgivings concerning her costume. Not wanting to “startle” Jane, he politely inquires into Simon’s whereabouts. In his essay “Tragedy, Mimicry and ‘The African World’,” Olakunle George confesses that his real interest lies in “the mere fact that Olunde discourse with Jane at all” (220). George reminds

³⁸ Olakunle George comments on Amusa’s reluctance to fulfill his duties as officer when faced with the vision of Pilkings in *egungun* attire. He explains how the masks represent, “in the traditional scheme of things, the spirit of dead ancestors incarnated” (213). Therefore, wearing the mask becomes a means to invoke the deceased.

the reader of Amusa's opposite reaction when seeing a foreigner adorned in ritual clothes.

While Amusa refuses to speak to Simon or Jane when they are still in *egungun* attire, Olunde presents no such apprehension. Fearing the same outraged response from Olunde, Jane tries to gauge the young man's response in order to judge whether she has offended yet again,

OLUNDE: You are...well, you look quite well yourself Mrs Pilkings. From what little I can see of you.

JANE: Oh, this. It's caused quite a stir I assure you, and not all of it very pleasant. You are not shocked I hope?

OLUNDE: Why should I be? But don't you find it rather hot in there? Your skin must find it difficult to breathe. (Soyinka *DKH* 50)

At first glance, Olunde, who Jane believes has been secularized by his university education in England, appears rather unfazed by the controversial use of a ritual mask by a foreigner. But as Jane inquires about Olunde's true opinions about the costume, she receives a "defensive-aggressive" (George 220) response from the son of the horseman. Indeed, when Olunde suggests that, "[her] skin must find it difficult to breathe," he reveals the metaphysical significance of the costume. When occupied by a subject who cannot recognize its cultural implications, a mask and traditional clothing threaten to encumber the wearer. Furthermore, Olunde's comment could also be a warning to Jane, implying that her physical body is obstructing the path of transition. Olunde then argues whether hosting a ball for the British prince is a "good cause for which [Jane and other colonial guests] desecrate an ancestral mask?" (Soyinka *DKH* 50). To this question, Jane disappointingly answers "Oh, so you are shocked after all" (Soyinka *DKH* 50). George explains that, initially, Olunde's arrival

introduces the voice of a character who has experienced the ways of the colonizers and returns undeterred from his foreign experience. His concerns for the misuse of traditional Yoruba apparel help readers understand that for the people of Oyo, clothing allows subjects from all realms of metaphysical life to develop patterns of communication that in turn, facilitate a fluid transition between worlds. In his dialogue with Jane, Olunde adopts the role of the teacher, educating Jane, his pupil, about the practice of wearing the ritual mask. The audience deduces that Olunde, having lived both in Nigeria and in England, presents an irrefutable distrust towards the colonizers who have shown themselves to be intolerant with a view to the sacred practices of the Yoruba. The young man reminds Jane that he has “now spent four years among [her] people” and “discovered that [they] have no respect for what [they] do not understand” (Soyinka *DKH* 50). Soyinka equips Olunde with “an aura only further nourished by the quiet authority with which he moves and speaks” (George 220). His rapport with Jane shows him to be a composed individual who is too quick to anger when faced with the sacrilegious ways of the white man. Instead, he uses his experience in the land of the colonizer to portray himself as a man who has insight in the workings of the colonizer’s mind.

Despite Soyinka’s many efforts to sustain a focus entirely based on the development of Yoruba culture, influences from colonial sources still emerge. In the conversation between Jane and Olunde, “Soyinka positions the native[s] and the European[s]” in a discourse based on “cultural comparison” (George 220). Two tales of suicide run parallel depicting community leaders who are willing to lay their lives for the benefit of others. The story of the English captain and Elesin’s ritual immolation highlight similarities in the ways both cultures attempt to maintain a peaceful environment for their people. As I have discussed in Chapter Two, the

two cases of voluntary suicide demonstrate, in Olunde's words, an "affirmative commentary on life" (Soyinka *DKH* 51). Although Jane fails to see the similarities between the two events, Soyinka believes that his readers will understand the purpose of this juxtaposition. However, this act would necessitate an act of what George would classify as "cultural comparison" which inevitably appears to fall into Soyinka's feared "clash of cultures" category. George makes an interesting claim, suggesting that for Olunde to appear more viable in the eyes of Jane (and perhaps even the reader), he must first undergo a process of secularization "on the terms of his Western education" (221). Hence, because Olunde has experienced life both inside and outside the boundaries of Yoruba cosmology, his opinions have more heft and authority.

A closer analysis of the reactions of Amusa and Olunde reveals the purpose of masks for the Yoruba. While Amusa insists that Jane and Pilkings remove the masks, especially in the presence of a townsperson for whom the masks represent the presence of the ancestors, Olunde appears apprehensive but calm in tone at the sight of the artifacts. George explains that for Amusa, "the mask signifies the spirit of the dead, regardless of who is wearing it" (221). Amusa remains "locked into the total transparency of the masks as a signifier of the world of the dead" (George 221), and believes that they function literally as conduits to the underworld. Amusa's spiritual beliefs remain "closer to the letter" (George 221) which demonstrate that his ability for interpretation is limited only to the word. For Olunde, it is important to pay attention "to *who* is wearing the mask" (George 221). Because Jane does not understand the significance of the ritual costume, Olunde does not feel threatened by the wrath of the entities of the underworld. Therefore, he "is able to see Jane as Jane" (George 221) and not an

embodiment of deceased characters. Soyinka supports Olunde's point-of-view because for him, "[t]he deft, luminous peace of Yoruba religious art blinds us therefore to the darker powers of the tragic art into which only the participant can truly enter" (*Myth* 155). Hence, for the faithful, the facial adornments can only expose their cosmic significance to those who subscribe to the same beliefs. In addition, Soyinka clarifies, "[t]he grotesquerie of the terror cults misleads the unwary into equating fabricated fears with the exploration of the Yoruba mind into the mystery of his individual will and the intimations of divine suffering to which artistic man is prone" (*Myth* 155). In other words, Soyinka outlines the pitfalls of incomplete interpretations, that is, productions of meaning that lack grounding in Yoruba culture. Masks, then, not only provide passage for spirits, but they also become intimate forms of communication among the initiated. The combination of Amusa's personal religious convictions³⁹ with his inflexible views on Yoruba traditions traps him in a stagnant space, a zone in which transition is either incomplete or impossible altogether.

George comments that Amusa's reaction reveals "that's his conceptual universe remains deeply tied to traditional Yoruba culture even though the secular demand of his job requires him not only to repudiate that culture but also to subject it to the discipline of colonial modernity" (213). The first part of George's argument reflects the sociocultural place of ritual in the Yoruba cosmos. Indeed, for the people of Oyo, ritual is not condemnable by law but is law. The Yoruba rely on the proper enactment of each ceremonial procedure to ensure peace in their community. The latter part of George statement is perhaps more revealing since he suggests that Amusa conforms to his professional responsibilities to "repudiate" the culture of

³⁹ It is important to remember that Soyinka informs us of Amusa has converted to Islam.

his ancestors in order to uphold the “discipline of colonial modernity.” This approach reveals the binary ideology that often equates African worldviews with archaic systems and colonial powers with modernity. These dichotomies beg the question, are ritual practices necessarily anchored in the past, or are they adaptable and capable of change? In other words, can rituals be modern? Adebayo Williams explains, “in the industrial and scientific age, ritual has acquired the pejorative connotation of a meaningless exercise, a mundane routine” (67). In a sense, the repetitive component of a ritual exposes it to scrutiny as it supposes that the faithful blindly replicate the habits of their predecessors simply to complete the ritual exercises.⁴⁰ Therefore, these “emptied spaces” (Williams 67) are believed to obstruct the possibility for cultural development. Part of Soyinka’s objective with his essay on the “Fourth Stage” of the Yoruba world is to present rituals as systems that are diachronic modes of representation which carry the weight of the past, represent the values of today, and look forward to the expectations of the future. What are readers to make of Elesin’s trepidations to honour his obligation to die? Are his actions in conflict with Soyinka’s concept of the Fourth Stage?

Through the character of Elesin Oba, Soyinka presents a society that is in constant transition. Although Elesin enters the scene as the sacrificial figure who is entrusted with the responsibility to uphold the traditions of past horsemen, Soyinka conceives this character in a way that does not cast Elesin as a representative of his community. As the object of the

⁴⁰ Eric Hobsbawm’s *The Invention of Tradition* is an important source for my study on ritual and tradition. He states, “‘invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past” (1). Hobsbawm’s theory stresses that a tradition is the replication of past behaviors. The notion of repetition is particularly pertinent for my study especially considering that Elesin breaches this tradition of repetition by being too invested in his personal desires for material pleasures. The cycle of repetition is thus altered because of Elesin.

sacrifice, Elesin has the responsibility to maintain the law, but at the same time, he is part of a larger systematic shift that becomes more apparent when surveying changes in other characters. But what does Elesin's failure to complete the ritual represent for his society? If rituals are part of the basis of Yoruba life, then what does his implicit rejection of ritual mean? How does this effect Elesin's relationship with his king as well as his community? Few records on the genesis of the ritual are available for examination, but in his essay "Death and the King's Horseman: A Poet's Quarrel With His Culture," Wole Ogundele sheds light on the origins of the spiritual mission of the *alafin's* disciple. He recounts,

Oral history tells us that originally, the *olokun esin* (Master of the Horse) did not have to die along with his king for any reason at all, political or metaphysical. The first *olokun esin* to die did so willingly. The reason, the oral historians say, was that that particular *olokun esin* and the king were uncommonly close friends. Such was the friendship that the *olokun esin* enjoyed all the rights and privileges that the king himself had, plus all the good things of life available in the empire. When the king died, this particular *olokun esin* thought that the only way to demonstrate his love and loyalty to his friend, the dead king, was to die, too.⁴¹ (49)

Here, oral tradition informs readers that the very first horseman to surrender his life did so willfully "to demonstrate his love and loyalty" to his sovereign. This discloses that the *olokun esin* had agency and created the sacrificial component of his responsibilities to the king as a way of demonstrating his undying adoration for the monarch. Therefore, rituals are susceptible

⁴¹ Ogundele credits this information to Akinwumi Isola, "a Yoruba poet and scholar of Yoruba oral culture and history" and Adebayo Ajala, "a nonliterate scholar of Oyo culture and history"

to change and they transition according to the needs of the people. Soyinka shows that believers are complicit with the evolution of rituals and that, ultimately, rituals are indicative of modern perspectives. The possibility of one horseman accommodating ritual for his own personal desires presents the opportunity for another to make similar changes. In other words, the design of the ritual custom is ever-changing. Then, what are readers to make of Elesin's reluctance to follow through with the sacrificial ceremony? Is his missed attempt at suicide a failure, or does it suggest an opportunity for yet another modification in Yoruba beliefs?

As I have stated in Chapter Two, although the play begins with the presentation of Elesin Oba, the sacrificial figure set to relinquish his earthly life to guide the king's spirit in the afterworld, his readiness to observe the ceremonial protocols of his people is questioned many times throughout the play. Despite Elesin's breakdown at the end of the play, when Pilkings and his men obstruct the sacrificial service and imprison the now "eater of left-overs" (Soyinka *DKH* 61) to a small cell, the imbalance in the Yoruba system presents an opportunity for a resurgence. In other words, Elesin's action may be the combination of human fears (such as dying) but also a penchant for change. While secluded in the cell, Jane and Simon confront a melancholic Elesin who realizes that he has now lost his place among his people. In a long reflection resembling a Shakespearean soliloquy, he reminisces:

For I confess to you, daughter, my weakness came not merely from the abomination of the white man who came violently into my fading presence, there was also a weight of longing on my earth-held limbs. I would have shaken it off, already my foot had begun to lift but then, the white ghost entered and all was defiled. (Soyinka *DKH* 65)

Talking to his new bride (who is also smuggled by the Pilkingses to avoid the possibility of violent altercations with other members of the town), Elesin exposes his tragic flaw. His “earth-held limbs” emerge as his main “weakness” which has always made him prone to material distractions and pleasures. He confesses that the appearance of the “white man,” although undeniable, is not the primary reason for the outcome of his ritual responsibilities. His “presence” had already begun “fading,” that is, his status as the important king’s horseman and carrier of tradition has been compromised by his own hubris. Hence, the dilemma is not so much about two cultures colliding in an assertion of power, but it concerns a man coming to terms with conflicting internal beliefs. George emphasizes this point by stating that Elesin’s “failure to die at the appointed time is due more to his own human weakness than to the agency of British colonialism” (154). In this passage, Elesin speaks in plain and simple prose. He has stripped his speech of the fancy loudness of Yoruba metaphors to reveal the essence of his thoughts. He is no longer hiding behind language.

Perhaps the real tragedy of the play resides in the banishment of Elesin as soon as he is found unworthy of pursuing his mission as the sacrificial leader. Once Olunde fills in for his father’s social expectations, it appears as though Elesin is no longer valuable to his community. But Elesin’s rejection of ritual immolation portrays him as a groundbreaking character, one that, thought his earthly desires, pushes for a reform of ritual law. His hubris, which naturally becomes his tragic flaw, also propels him to push for change. Adebayo Williams claims that Elesin’s “refusal to honor his oath” demonstrates a “paradoxically progressive” approach (75). Although many of the characters herald Olunde as the new bearer of Yoruba values, Williams finds it “difficult to identify the point at which his role as a

cultural hero ends and where his role as the rearguard defender of a backward-looking political order prevails” (75). Williams is not suggesting that abiding by rituals is an archaic act, but he is offering the opinion that Elesin’s refusal is an attempt to reformulate a tradition that might not be wholly applicable for his people. Since rituals, for the Yoruba, fluctuate according to the needs of the people, then they should be open to new transformations.

Masks, music, dances and ritual costumes all figure as alternative forms of communication, each asserting a model of language with unique Yoruba properties. More importantly, they demonstrate that Elesin Oba is not the only character imbued with conflicting opinions on his culture. Through their misinterpretations of Yoruba music and ritual masks, both Olunde and Amusa also reveal certain disparities among members of the community. These changing attitudes suggest that although the colonizers have perhaps not “clashed” with the colonized, foreign influences have now become part of the Yoruba reality, and thus, active in the process of transition towards new forms of ritual discourse.

Conclusion

They believe that persons live, depart, and are reborn and that every individual comes from either gods or one's ancestors on the mother's or the father's side. In addition, rituals are efficacious only when they are performed regularly according to tenets from the past and creatively re-presented to suit the present.

(Henry John Drewal, "The Yoruba World")

The study of language in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* provides numerous indications on the status of each character in the play. Although at first glance it may seem that Elesin Oba is the only individual who abandons his obligation to the ritual, many other characters also demonstrate a shift in ideology. As Drewal observes in the epigraph, rituals are "efficacious" when they respect the "tenets from the past," but they must also be compatible with the demands of "the present." In other words, rituals must be adaptable or they run the risk of becoming outdated and extinct. This is where I believe the main conflict in the play resides, that is, the coming to terms with the reality that some of the components of the ritual suicide are no longer applicable to this changing Yoruba society. Elesin's desire for earthy indulgences is partly to blame for his eventual failure to follow his king to the grave but his lack of commitment to continue the self-immolation ritual presents the possibility that this practice contains aspects that perhaps negate his people's current state of beliefs. The entrance of the colonizers magnifies many of these changing views. Through their use of the English language, characters manifest their positions regarding Elesin's commitment to death, and it also provides them the opportunity to speak to the colonizers in their own language.

Soyinka's tragedy culminates with the death of promising young medical student Olunde, as well as the demise his father, the former king's horseman Elesin Oba. Instead of one life, two are consecrated to the sacrificial ritual. Despite his eventual suicide, it appears that Elesin is stripped of his posthumous honour. Iyaloja, the "'Mother' of the Market,"⁴² concedes, "[h]e is gone at last into the passage but oh, how late it all is. His son will feast on the meat and throw him bones. The passage is clogged with the droppings from the King's stallion; he will arrive all stained in dung" (Soyinka *DKH* 76). The disgraced Elesin has willed himself to death not to fulfill his obligation to his king, but to relieve himself from the humiliation of not completing his responsibilities. The requirements of the ritual have been performed by Olunde, who Iyaloja believes will "feast on the meat" as a reward for his determination to guide the dead monarch in the afterworld. Henry Louis Gates Jr. states, "[d]eath for Elesin is not a final contract: it is rather a rite of passage to the larger world of the ancestor, a world linked in the continuous bond of Yoruba metaphysics to that of the living and the unborn" (156). Perhaps it is this very notion that Elesin might no longer believe in. His apprehension to uphold tradition might be a sign of his wavering views on Yoruba mythology. During a conversation between Joseph, "the houseboy to the Pilkingses" (Soyinka *DKH* 5), Simon and Jane, language reveals the Elesin's fate:

PILKINGS: ... what is supposed to be going on in town tonight?

JOSEPH: Tonight sir? You mean that chief who is going to kill himself?

PILKINGS: What?

JANE: What do you mean, kill himself?

⁴² Iyaloja is described as the Mother of the Market in the play's Characters List.

PILKINGS: You mean he is going to kill somebody don't you?

JOSEPH: No master. He will not kill anybody and no one will kill him. He will simply die. (Soyinka *DKH* 27)

As the three characters wrestle to come to terms with the true significance of Elesin's actions, Joseph's last comment best describes the horseman's true feelings regarding his death. No one is imposing this sentence on Elesin because the community believes that he will chose it for himself. Elesin has greatly enjoyed the privileges that accompanied his position and has exhausted material pleasures such as food and sex. As Izevbaye explains, "[d]ishonour has its material expressions also" (146), which it seems might be more important to Elesin than the metaphysical one. Language makes us feel that Elesin's "physical experience" (Izevbaye 146) has precedence over the spiritual one, hence for Elesin to "simply die" (Soyinka *DKH* 27) would represent the biggest tragedy. When Joseph exclaims that Elesin "will simply die," language also positions the houseboy in a space of skepticism. The houseboy's statement, expresses an uncertainty as to whether Elesin gains immortality by laying down his life. It reveals a wavering belief in the ways of the ancestors. Language leads into the psyche of each character and exposes their position with regards to the ritual suicide.

One of the challenges in Soyinka's text is finding the purpose of the colonizer in the story. As I have outlined in Chapter One, Soyinka is adamant about resisting a reading that would suppose a "clash of cultures" between the English and the Yoruba. Although this request seems impossible at first, Soyinka grounds his play in concepts that are inherently Yoruba. Critic Philip Brockbank considers Soyinka's play a "revelation of the way in which

theatre can reach into the heart of a community and make vital, amusing and distressing discoveries about its ordeals and its capacities for life” (78). For the author, the organizing principles of the Yoruba world focus on the tragic events of Elesin Oba’s cosmic trajectory. The confusion occurs at the moment where Simon Pilkings intervenes in Elesin’s ritual suicide. Pilkings’s refusal to comply with the customs of the Yoruba pushes him in the horseman’s path and eventually compels the district officer to abduct Elesin and stop the ritual. However, Ato Quayson clarifies, “[b]y the time of the interruption of the ritual by the white man, Elesin is caught within the grasp of multiple realities which deepen any psychological weakness of his character. The precise moment of the ritual is also the moment at which he is at the threshold of liminality” (228). Quayson explains that Elesin’s anxieties concerning his role as the sacrificial figure have developed long before the arrival of the colonizer. In other words, “the intervention of the white man is seen as only an instrument that precipitates a crisis which tests Elesin’s preparedness for death” (Quayson 224). Pilkings’s intervention gives Elesin an opportunity to escape from his cultural commitments.

The deaths of Elesin and Olunde heighten the dramatic ending of the play and enhance the tragic element of Soyinka’s work. With the demise of Elesin, and the unnecessary elimination of a young and hopeful medical student, readers are no doubt left with the impression that ritual has caused “a reactionary culture and a flagrant feudalistic ethos” (Williams 75). But as Adebayo Williams points out, Elesin’s resistance to pursue his fatal calling presents a “paradoxically progressive” (75) action. Soyinka utilizes the ritual as a means to “affirm the status quo or ... to question it” (Ogundele 48) and as such, the playwright highlights some of the fissures in the longstanding traditions of the Yoruba. Soyinka

endeavors to present the Yoruba ritual as a contemporary form of governance that, in order to stay relevant for its followers, is in a constant process of renewal. As Simon Ross posits, “Soyinka...argues that one of the characteristics and specific aspects of Yoruba cosmology is precisely that it does not use myth as a transcendental category but as one that has to engage with the changing conditions of modernity” (253). With the help of his theorization of the “Fourth Stage” of the Yoruba universe, Soyinka focuses on the abyss of transition that moves entities through the worlds of the living, dead and the unborn. Hence, transition becomes the current that propels the “repetitive cycle” (Soyinka *Myth* 156) of the tragedy, which in turn, informs the linguistic landscape of the play.

As the people of Oyo experience the transitory forces of the “Fourth Stage” so too does language. Language demonstrates numerous transformations which Stanley Macebuh recognizes when he writes, “[f]or the contemporary African concerned to delve deeply enough into his ancestral past, to articulate the past is to expose oneself to the obtrusiveness of Western culture” (31). The ways in which the colonial forces have been integrated in Soyinka’s play are, in my opinion, more dominant than the playwright wishes to acknowledge. Indeed, the simplistic reading of a “clash of cultures” is no doubt reductive and would oppose the African society to the British invaders. Nevertheless, the imperial forces contribute in the process of transition that had already begun. In my three chapters, I have focused on language as the dominant means of tracking how colonizer and colonized confront one another on a linguistic battleground. According to Mpalive-Hangson Msiska,

in *Death and the King’s Horseman* Soyinka appropriates the historical encounter between Africa and the West and transforms it into myth, as the historical event is no

longer circumscribed by time and space, but is instead universalized into the general questions of political agency, predetermination and free will. (70)

Indeed, the mythic background of Soyinka's oeuvre also influences the language of the play. The combination of the colonial importation of English and the mythic imagination of the Yoruba creates a multitude of forms of expression. The hybrid quality of language stretches far beyond the written or spoken words and is transfused in dance and song as well. All these factors create Soyinka's vision of the "threnodic essence" that is a constant reminder that ritual death forms the basis of this Yoruba society. Interestingly, Martin Banham reveals that Soyinka's emphasis on the play's "threnodic essence" is not just a "lamentation for the dead" but that it is "also a lamentation for the living" (132). The cycle of regeneration that Soyinka perceives leads to a "perpetual dying-into-life" (Brockbank 89). The same concept can be used for the language of the play. With every new cycle, some linguistic sensibilities are lost, while others are enhanced.

The goal of Chapter One was to outline some of the benefits as well as the frustrations of using English as the primary means of communication for a story that is rooted in Yoruba mythology. Using Soyinka's "Author's Note" as my starting point, I set out to investigate his claim that the colonial forces should not be considered more than a "mere catalyst" (*DKH* 5) in Elesin's cosmic trajectory. Although this might be a possibility for a plot-based reading, the language of the play reveals an amalgamation of Standard English, Pidgin English, local Yoruba dialects, and localized forms of speech, revealing how native vernaculars have been diversified by the importation of the colonizer's language. Hence, on a linguistic level, the presence of the colonizer's influence could not be relegated to the status of a catalyst. Chapter

Two dives into the text to discuss important instances where language presents crucial moments of self-reflection for this changing Yoruba community. Finally, Chapter Three explores alternative forms of discourse in representations of music, dance and ritual masks. These forms of dialogue present ways of communication that are innately Yoruba and are part of the fabric of the Yoruba world. Altogether, the three chapters of this thesis demonstrate how the different transformations of language emerge as *Death and the King's Horseman's* crowning achievement. In his play, Soyinka has developed a linguistic spectrum that highlights the subtleties of the Yoruba cosmos and his commitment to English becomes an effective medium to tell the story of a colonized society without compromising the essence of the Yoruba imagination.

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