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Ritual, cultural politics and the suicides in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*

Tertsea Ikyoive^{a*} and Ayub Sheik^b

^aTeaching and Research, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa; ^bLanguage and Media Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa

This study positions itself towards a critical interpretation of suicide in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) and its reception in the traditional Yoruba culture of South West Nigeria. Its central thesis is that ritual and culture significantly influence suicide in traditional African society and Yoruba society in particular. This study uses textual analysis as its methodology to probe the historical, cultural and social context of the play. The approach is analytic and interrogative as it illuminates the circumstances that surround the suicides in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* as well as how the play mediates the reality of suicide as perceived in Yoruba tradition as against Western epistemology. In addition, the study suggests that the suicide in Soyinka's play is not mainly an escape from shame but a necessary and pragmatic step consonant with the Yoruba belief system and mythical tradition. Finally, the study explores yet another caveat, the use of the Yoruba mythical tradition for personal gain. It concludes by determining that the failure of traditional elites to manipulate culture and tradition for their political interests leads them to frustration, and subsequently motivates suicide as a form of escapism.

Keywords: culture; politics; ritual; suicide

Introduction

Death and the King's Horseman (1975) is one of Soyinka's earliest plays that take a critical look at Yoruba tradition as well as its cultural universe. Earlier studies on the play have been focused on the stylistic (Adejare 1995), literary (Dasyilva 2004), and pragmatic (Odebode 2002; Aremu 2008) analyses of it in terms of historical and ritual context. Renowned critics on the play such as; Jeyifo (2003), Ogundele (1994), George (1999), Ralph-Bowman (1983) and others have critiqued the play from the dimensions of mythic criticism, performance analysis, author's commentary, tradition and the metaphysics of sacrifice. Recent studies by scholars such as McNulty (2011), Panda (2012), Aremu (2015) Ikyoive (2016a) and others have also critiqued the play from the legal, pragmatic and ritual points of view.

One of the most compelling criticisms of *Death and the King's Horseman* is centred under the discussion of the metaphysics of sacrifice. Ralph-Bowman (1983) in his article; 'Leaders and Left-overs': *A Reading of Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman* assert that for one to appreciate in Soyinka's play the 'religious mystery' which undoubtedly lies at the core of the play, one must try to forget 'the whole western

*Corresponding author. Email: ikyoiwetj85@gmail.com

tradition of individual tragedy' (p. 56). Ralph-Bowman proceeds to argue that, although the protagonist, Elesin appears to have the appearance of a tragic hero, he cannot be possibly likened to 'the grandeur, dignity and pathos of Oedipus' (Balogun 2014, p. 60) nor 'the questing anguish of Hamlet' (p. 60). What Ralph-Bowman is saying here is that the tragedy of Elesin is not the tragic loss of an individual but rather the tragedy of the communal Yoruba values in which Elesin is found wanting and condemned. It means therefore, that the stature of Elesin has, without question to be totally renounced. That is why Elesin is rejected by the world of the play because of allowing himself to be diverted by his sense of selfish individualism from that of sacrificial death prescribed by his Yoruba religion.

Adding a corollary to Ralph-Bowman's argument, Birbalsingh (1982) in his article *Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman* argues similarly that, Olunde's climatic sacrifice can only be understood in metaphysical terms. It seems logical therefore to say that, the event in the play may not have happened realistically. However, it must have happened psychologically, subconsciously and even spiritually in Soyinka's mind. Birbalsingh (1982) throughout his career traces Soyinka's developing 'faith in sacrifice.' He examined some of his plays like; *The Strong Breed* (1969), *Madmen and Specialist* (1974), etc. and discovers that the coherence of the playwright's thinking is temporarily affected by some form of encroaching pessimism.

In another vein, Booth, (1988) in his article; *Self-sacrifice and Human Sacrifice in Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman* expresses his own view of sacrifice in Soyinka's work as asserting to 'cosmic totality' where the individuals play a significant role in the unification of the Yoruba universe. He concludes that, Soyinka presents at last a story, which the efficacy of self-sacrifice is convincingly demonstrated. The ritual suicide by Olunde is interpreted as a powerful metaphor for all sacrifice of self. However, the implication of that efficacy contained in Olunde's self-sacrifice strikes a strangely practical note in a metaphysical context. For Elesin, his sacrifice is necessary in that it will maintain the integrity of a civilization at a crucial point in history.

It is thinkable to suggest that, the argument of such influential critics here like; Ralph-Bowman (1983), Birbalsingh (1982) and Booth (1988) is dictated by Soyinka's own admonition in the author's note of his play. Soyinka expressly warns the would-be producer against a 'sadly familiar reductionist tendency' (Soyinka 1976, p. i) that might lead to the presentation of the play as a facile clash of cultures. Soyinka urges the producer to attempt 'the far more difficult and risky task of eliciting the play's threnodic essence' (Soyinka 1976, p. ii). He went on to insist that the 'colonial factor in the play is an incident, a catalytic incident merely. He advises that 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' (Soyinka 1975, p. i). There is therefore no obvious tendency of comparison between the African and the Europeans as suggested by Soyinka. It is only essentially metaphysical as a theme of the Yoruba 'abyss of transition' and Elesin's failure to enter it. Soyinka does not exclusively insist on the African-ness as a theme but only stresses the metaphysical quality of the central conflict in Elesin's mind as an identity of the Yoruba mind.

Another argument emanating from Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* lies in the fact that it is a tragic play. An article; *Death and the King's Horseman: A Poet's Quarrel with his Culture* demonstrates Soyinka's play as a full-fledged autonomous secular tragedy. The argument in this article upholds and interrogates the cultural

values and ethics of the Yoruba people to locate the tragic sense of the play (Ogundele 1994). The argument here also stems from the fact that, *Death and the King's Horseman* may be a play of metaphysical confrontation. However, the confrontation is grounded only firmly in historical fact and not necessarily myth. It means therefore that the play engages critically in a historical approach that questions the cultures as well as revitalizes the contradictions in the ethics of the same culture. Soyinka actualizes this by discovering a tripartite pattern of tragic conflict in the myths and rituals of Yoruba deities (particularly Ogun). In his critical work; *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976), Soyinka gives equal stress in the stages of his essay contained in the book on the traditional myths, beliefs and ethics of the Yoruba people as well as the religious rites that validate them. The rites he indicates are only performed during sacred periods when the priests are incarnations of the deities. However, in whichever way the rituals are used, Soyinka's plays are actually about mortals acting in secular time.

Despite the critical perspectives discussed by such influential scholars; Adejare (1995), Dasyva (2004), Odebole (2002) Aremu (2008) Jeyifo (2003), Ogundele (1994), George (1999), Ralph-Bowman (1983) and others, there has been no particular attention paid on understanding the representation and reception of suicide in the play. Although, scholars like Balogun (2015) Ogundele (1994) George (1999), Ikyoive (2016a) and others have studied how suicide is represented in the play as a tragic theme, the intention of this article is to expand and deepen the corpus of critical attention about the phenomenon of suicide as represented in Soyinka's play not from the perspective of tragedy but as a communal responsibility accepted in Yoruba culture. The key critical questions the article endeavours to answer is; how does the play mediate the reality of suicide as perceived in Yoruba tradition? What is the relationship between the play and the historical period in which it was written?

Tradition and Suicide in Yoruba culture: South-west Nigeria.

Tradition has and will continue to remain a closely knit practice that defines and identifies a particular group of people. Societies all over the world have certain practices that are associated with them. In modern practice, tradition can be invented to reflect the historical past of the people. Hobsbawm (1983) sees invented tradition to mean:

... a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules 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 historical past. (p. 1)

Hobsbawm's reflection of an invented tradition is quite illuminating as it adopts both the ritualistic nature of tradition and the symbolic interpretation of it. This is because not all traditions must accompany with them any form of ritual practice, but the overtly symbolic nature that a particular form of practice through constant repetition derives meaning from those who practice it. To appropriate this conception is to say that, the act of suicide in traditional African society and the Yoruba society in particular, absorbs an internal meaning and reception from members of its Community. The act of suicide in Yoruba culture therefore detaches itself from the perception of

inhumanity, illegality and the violation of human life as perceived in Western and contemporary thought. Suicide is not necessarily interpreted in Yoruba culture as a tragic act, rather it is what the culture upholds and the individual meant to commit such a suicide does it with willingness and communal pride.

As a global phenomenon, suicide has different interpretations and reception among societies. Nigeria, with almost 450 tribes, is replete with multicultural groups. To focus and relate the reception of suicide in Nigeria to be the same among the cultures will generate intellectual debate and academic controversy. It is understandable that suicide has been reflected in some Nigerian plays and novels; they differ from one culture to the other. The concern of this article is to look at the Yoruba view of suicide and how it is represented in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. Moreover, other plays emanating from the same cultural background, such as Rotimi's *Kurunmi* (1975), Ogunyemi's *The Vow* (1985) and so on, also reflect the themes of suicide which can be understood outside the context of tragedy. It is important therefore to understand how suicide is received among the traditional Yoruba culture of Southwestern Nigeria.

Iliffe (2005) expresses the art and act of suicide in traditional Yoruba culture, as one of the expressions of protest and resistance, which is not particular to 'superindividuals'; rather, it is a way to discredit one's oppressor, liberate oneself from torture. This philosophy is not strange to the moral ideology of the African. On the one hand, suicide can be a measure used by people as an escape from shame and a protection of honour; on the other, and by far the most significant observation, suicide is therefore a therapeutic, meditated action in which the subject himself is in full control as the producer.

A point that may incidentally throw light on this hypothesis of Iliffe is the understanding of forms and functions of suicide in an African World view. Iliffe's supposition is valid enough on this point:

Suicide was a common response to enslavement, cruelty, and offended honour. In the Atlantic trade, many slaves killed themselves before embarkation, drowned themselves by jumping overboard, refused food and starved to death. ... The cape colony averaged between fifteen and twenty reported slave suicides a year during the eighteenth century, overwhelmingly by foreign-born males who hanged themselves. Some were escaping cruel punishments for crimes or desertion. ... Fear of being sold to brutal masters was another motive ... some were moved by humiliation and loss of liberty. (Iliffe 2005, p. 131)

In considering this phenomenon with some significant account, W.S. Allen's report of 7 February 1883 on how one of the Are's slaves stabbed himself with a knife in his belly and the bowels came out, intending to kill himself, rather than being kept in shackles. Within varying degrees of illustrative works we have had the chance to study the striking similarities in cultural ideology and religious belief as the guiding principles in the complex themes of suicide. A continuous opposition is not only desirable but essential for a fuller understanding that the will to die or commit suicide is not as a consequence of external shattering experience, but is rather entrenched in the collective ideology represented by what Abati would refer to as a people's philosophical penchants' and 'a replication of cultural reality.' According to Abati, 'Death and *indeed suicide* has more than one meaning, context is important' (1990, p. 17). I agree with Abati's assertion in his submission. This has to do with the fact that most of the opinions on the phenomenon, especially from the stand-point of different religious doctrines and

racial backgrounds, are diverse. Many of the writers who have tried to explain the concept of death through suicide only raise concerns about its purpose. Thus, the varied opinions on suicide, according to Clarke and Lester (2013)'s observation fall into two distinct categories – the One-way or Uni-linear Perspective and the Cyclic view. To those who hold the Uni-linear Perspective, suicide leads to the eventual end to human life on earth. It is considered to be a complete extermination. This view is prevalent in Islamic thought, Christianity and Judaism. The Cyclic view, on the other hand, holds that life is repetitive. To them, the result of suicide is 'a momentary disappearance which is revived again in another form.' Swami Rama of the Himalaya stated in his Introduction to M.V. Kamath's *Philosophy of Life and Death* that:

(Birth) is but one bend of the eternal stream of life. In its continuity the stream of life rushes through many avenues and finally meets the ocean. Coming out of one avenue is called death and going through another avenue is called birth. So is the case of human life ... (Death) is merely a game of hide and seeks which can never mystify the wise one who knows how to look to himself and beyond. (Kamath, 2006. p. xi)

It will be deduced from Swami's assertion that the act of suicide is received without a second thought especially when one believes that his/her death is only a continuation of his existence in a better realm. Swami further expresses the perspective of those who hold the cyclical view of human existence such as the Buddhists, the Greeks, the Yoruba, the Hindus and the Chinese that 'Birth and death are like two commas in the sentence of life. The sentence of life begins from eternity and is everlasting and never ending, as one changes one's pillow cover or book cover, so one casts off one's body' (Kamath 2006, pp. xii–xiii). Casting off the body is called death and assuming a new garment is called birth.

All the views notwithstanding, man has never seen it as a familiar aspect of nature that he needs to take for granted. He could not entirely underestimate the power of death and its reality in his everyday life. Thus, sorrow is exhibited by man as the dominant attitude to the manifestation of death and the moment of dying. There is bound to be a feeling of loss and grief at the passing away of a loved one and even as one thinks of committing suicide, there is an extreme moment of psychological and emotional pain before the act is finally done. As a result of the existing agonizing fear and anxiety that the body would become lifeless, deteriorate and decay, death is strongly and often portrayed as a tragedy. This point does not erase the fact that one's death by any means will not constitute a tragic moment for those still living, especially close friends and relatives. The depiction of the moments of sorrow and its psychological effects which is the subject of thanatology, the study of death is found in the collection of passages, phrases and proverbs of both ancient and modern literature. For example, in the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* (c. 3500 BC), according to Guo et al. (2013, p. 126); death is depicted as a moment of captivity: 'Death is before me today as a man longs to see his house when (I would be) in captivity.' The feeling of exasperation and dejection at the thought of suicide is accurately depicted in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In the play, the eponymous hero Hamlet, in his wish to eliminate his grief at the cost of his life, reflects on the after-effects of death:

To be or not to be? that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them? To die: to sleep; No more; and, by a sleep to say we end the heartache and the

thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummation devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep; to sleep: perchance to dream: ay there's the rub for in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause. (Act 3, Scene I)

The moment of tragedy is also creatively affirmed in African and Oriental literary traditions. Wole Soyinka (1988) in response to Biodun Jeyifo's question on his opposing antinomies and:

... a deeply and profound tragic and pessimistic outlook, remarks that tragedy is a reflection of the human condition which the human spirit must overcome and enrich himself through the example of those who succeed in overcoming the moment of despair, those who arise from the total fragmentation of the psyche, the annihilation of even their ego, and yet succeed in piercing them together, piece the rubble together to emerge and enrich us by that example. (Soyinka 1988, pp. xvii–xviii)

As further put by Soyinka, the role of the writer is not to 'ignore the tragic aspect of human experience, that tragic face of truth, that is part of the property of the experience, and that is part of the richness of art and literature.' Central to the act of suicide among the traditional Yoruba culture is the concept of honour. Honour is a concept that has to do with esteem, respectability and reputation. According to Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers:

Honour is the value of a person in his own eyes but also in the eyes of the society. It is his estimation of his own worth, his claim to pride, but it is also the acknowledgement of that claim, his excellence recognized by society, his right to pride. (Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers 2005, p. 21)

This means that a personal appraisal of oneself is not sufficient to confer honour, the society must 'recognize that claim' which is characteristically displayed through a person's reputation. The role of society as judge is thus very substantial in the realization of honour by its members. These two proportions of honour: the personal and the social are thus closely related. Suicide among the traditional Yoruba people was made manifest because of the fear of public ridicule also called 'ignominy' that partially drove them to kill themselves. Another reason for the act of suicide was the 'collectivity of honour.' Collectivity of honour is associated with societal groups such as families, ancestries and kin groups. Amongst such groups, an act of dishonour by a single member will affect all others just as a single member would bask in the honour of the group. Therefore, where status is acknowledged by birth, 'honour develops not only from individual status but from antecedence' (Adeboye 2006). It is imperative at this point to understand how suicide is represented in other African plays.

Suicide: reflections and representations in African plays

Suicide has been represented in African plays in many different ways. The representation of suicide in some African plays has served to reflect also some aspect of tragic themes. The motivation of individual characters in fictional texts to commit suicide vary from one to the other. Some of the characters' commit suicide to escape from a deep moral guilt, escape from shame because of a dishonourable act,

regrettable adversity and sorrow to blind self-pride, etc. Characters who end their own lives as a result of pride and misery are fascinating subjects in the traditional African concept of tragedy. However heroic, the suicide of most of the leading protagonist characters in some of the African plays can be said to be driven by excessive lust for power and failure to accept humbly the possibility of conquest or taunt. Self-imposed death can hardly be explained only in line with the self-absorption of the characters. Such self-imposed death is far from being the product of individual misery alone; there is also a cultural dimension. In this regard, the tragic occurrence denotes not just a psychological ordeal of the protagonists, but a catastrophe in African world-order.

The enduring impact of suicide, in some plays of African origin, can only be described by the fact that it includes more than some individual's intense drive to terminate their lives. More important is the fact that such an action is both sacred and taboo. The knowledge and impact of suicide is not outside the understanding of the traditional African worldview. The sacred nature of suicide in Africa is directly connected to the communal perspective to life, a desire to come to terms with the mystery of existence. Due to the prevailing factors that relate to the elements of the sacred and the taboo in the traditional African worldview, it is important to affirm that it is not the situations or conditions surrounding the nature of death of the principal figures in African literature that falls under the classification of taboo. It is the nature of their burial rites or funeral processions, which occupies a rather 'special' place in each particular case. When considering this, two central aspects are worthy of emphasis. One, suicide indicates a departure from the normal expression of a communal world-order and in the second place it symbolizes something that only shows the interest and self-assertion of the individual and it is not in favour of communal will or the society respectively. The perception of suicide as repugnant in an African context is based on the fact that it is morally sanctioned. In other words, self-imposed death that, to be sure is not a consistent expectation of the community, is not a norm-deviating phenomenon. Suicide is neither abnormal nor forbidden (Balogun, 2014).

The suicide of protagonist characters in African plays are not essentially confined to the upper class; they also, to some measurable extent, comprise the socially inadequate individuals. Almost more important than the suicide in African plays is the convincing attempt to depict its tragic impact in line with the traditional African world-view. Thus, it appears to be, at first sight, the tendency to represent suicide as a 'transition.' This inclination corresponds to the belief or rather assumption that suicide is a sacrifice of this present life to a more graceful destiny in the next life. Suicide then is both a practical refusal to accept the life of weakness and an assertively sacrificial atonement within a heroic tradition. It is of central importance to note that apart from a solemn act of penance and heroic action, the image of the suicidal characters is predominantly egocentric in many of the plays. There is, inherent in the major characters a sense of moral principle and pride in the indigenous culture; in other words, the self-assurance that their belief is not just correct but in fact superior accounts for the tragic elements in the plays. It is worth pointing out that a suicide hero's hostility towards what he sees as disgraceful is another insistent theme in the African dramatic tradition. The cultural background of the protagonist is an indispensable background to the understanding of the phenomenon as a tragic experience. It defines the moral implication of suicide and the context in which death by one's

own hand is considered acceptable. Within the community, the suicide hero's individual character can be assessed ambivalently on the question of moral significance. This has to do with the understanding of how his actions are of crucial importance for the interpretation of the vices and virtues in his decision. They determine the degrees by which his attitudes contribute to the act of suicide. The tragic ending is to be found in the suicidal individual's sense of loss. There is no doubt that a superior stance is at the heart of all self-killing, especially when the suicide hero's self-esteem is at low ebb. The expression of grief which characterizes the motivation to suicide, to borrow a phrase from Chalker (2013, p. 17), can be 'between the mundane and the heroic.' In clearer terms, what leads to suicide may have no reason that is near 'tragic.' It is the hero's distorted perception of the world and conception of death as the fundamental solution to potential crises that gives rise to the sad endings. Whether the actions of the leading figures are in line with the norms and practices of their community, or differ in principle, the impact of the phenomenon needs to be seen within the context of their community. It is an understatement to claim that religious traditions and communal institutions play a significant role in the act of suicide.

In addition, the representation of suicide as an art of self-destruction in itself is central to the cultural conception of bravery, it should also be concerned with the place of suicide in the social order. Apart from viewing the act of suicide as a crime particularly in Western epistemology, suicide can also be viewed as an ultimate test of one's courage as self-destruction can be a fashionable exercise of self-will. The way in which each individual character commits suicide confirms both the cultural attitudes and the worldview of the particular society. What elicits reactions and meaning of the suicide depends not so much on the sense of an organic model of society that is, family ties and duties, but on what the hero or heroine accepts as fate (Balogun 2014).

More explicitly, it is the acceptance of death by one's own hand in a hopeless situation that is regarded as a prototype of the tragic character. The sense of heroism is closely related to the motivations to suicide in several accounts of death. The value-systems of a society, to some degree, are the essential factors that determine the socio-psychological meaning of suicide. In a society where honour and its uncompromising display are crucial to the individual, public loss of face, status or one's place of authority can be an overriding motivation to commit suicide. This is clearly depicted in one of J.P. Clark-Bekederemo's plays, *Song of a Goat* (1964). The word 'goat' which is alluded to in the play, as noticed by Egbe Ife (1994), is symbolic. It is a reference to the victim of ridicule among the indigenous people of the riverine regions of Izon and Urhobo. The 'sacrificial victim' here is the principal character Zifa whose suicide is as a result of what the community defines as a stigma. In a society where shame is greatly feared, Zifa's consequent impotence and inability to impregnate his wife, Ebiere after one male child, Dode, easily fits into what can be felt personally as misery. His failure to perform what the society considers as the foremost duty of a husband makes all his numerous gifts and caring for his wife a subject of ridicule. The Masseur he consults for a cure observes:

MASSEUR: I can see you care very much. Everyone can see that. You buy your wife the truest Madras, beat for her the best gold and anyone can see she is very well-fed. But we fatten our maidens to prepare for fruition, not to thwart them. (Clark-Bekederemo 1964, p. 10)

To Zifa's dismay, he thereby suggests that in order not to make the state of his impotence a public knowledge, he should consider another person, preferably a member of his family, to take over his wife with the support of his In-laws and bear children in his name. This prospect is extremely shameful to Zifa, especially when his love for his wife is truly deep. He laments:

- ZIFA: Oh, Ebiere, my wife, my wife, has it come to this? And what is to become of me? Of course, they will have to kill me first.
- MASSEUR: Do not think it that way, my son. Some till, but others must catch bird or fish. Each is a lot with its own song.
- ZIFA: I will die first.
- MASSEUR: No, that is a child's talk. Even I, that am crippled in more ways than one, live and hope to some purpose for my people. Why should you talk then of dying? One must first lay out all things to talk of going home. So go home now and to your wife and act on these things. (Clark-Bekederemo 1964, pp. 12–13)

Incidentally, the sexual deprivation is for a period of three floods (Years) and it leads Ebiere to lure her husband's younger brother, Tonye, to go to bed with her. This act is only considered abominable for Tonye because the role is not yet wilfully delegated to him by Zifa according to customary practice. It is over this shame of loss of honour that Zifa agonizes as he confides in their aunt, Orukorere:

- ZIFA: Save me, mother, save me from this disaster, I fear has befallen me.
- ORUKORERE: Of course, I will. There, my child, rest your head on my shoulders shrunken up with age. But they still can give my son support. Who knows how milk enters the coconut? Now, don't sob, oh my son, my son, do not cry! Only the goat may cry when the leopard has him in his toils, and I'm sure my son is no goat.
- ZIFA: It is, it is so degrading. (Clark-Bekederemo 1964, p.20)

Tonye's forbidden action which suggests contempt for his elder brother makes the latter to bend at claiming back his honour and thereby causes his shame to remain only a family affair. Zifa charges at him with a cutlass. Unfortunately, this confrontation further makes both the incest and the stigma of impotence a public knowledge when Tonye, out of fright, locks himself up in a room and hangs himself on the loft 'with his loin-cloth, standing on the mortal upturned.' In his strong and unrelenting pursuit of dignity then, Zifa pleads that Tonye's death is due to an unjust treatment and ingratitude on his part. He contemplates his brother's act of going to bed with his wife a loyal duty to him, not an outrageous abomination as defined by the society, especially when it is meant to 'keep what his brother was powerless to keep in the house.' Interestingly, Zifa's words drive home a point against the issues that concern morality and what characterizes tragedy when he says:

- ZIFA: Do not run; oh do not run away you people. You see the wretch has gone and hanged himself on the loft. But it is I indeed have killed the boy – my brother, poor, poor brother, do you hang aloft there smiling in my face? I

sought to kill you but in that office you have again performed my part. You veer away from me; why should you not avoid me as one with small-pox when I have taken my brother's life? For though you see me bloodless it is this arm did this deed and this cutlass you see dry is flowing even now with the red blood of my brother, the brother, the boy born after me to look after but who now has twice taught me my duty. Here I break my matchet upon my head and may everything fly apart even as I throw these iron bits asunder. The poor, brave boy has truly done for me. Good people, I hope you understand. It is not that I desired to drink out of his scalp which is unnatural, but that boy, He went in to my wife, my wife who although under my roof for five years I could not possess, for you see I am powerless between my thighs. Was that not a brotherly act? He sought to keep what his brother was powerless to keep in the house. My house, it has collapsed in season that is calm to others. My father's built it before my time that my children and theirs to come may find a roof above their heads. And now what have I done with it? In my hands it falls into a state of disrepair and now is fallen, fallen. Nothing stands; I will go and find a new place to rest. (Clark-Bekederemo 1964, p. 51)

Hence, he leaves for the sea and drowns himself. The traditional African notion of manliness has been shown, in many of the African plays, to be an essential and crucial point in the assessment of the custom of self-killing.

Apart from this deep-seated relevance, self-centred projection of a character's aspiration is expressed powerfully. While acknowledging the relationship between suicide and cultural tradition, it is crucial to state that just as society can sometimes cause it through its several norms, so it can deal with its consequences by its own means. The effective weight of the suicide lies in its effect on the existing value-system. The political function as well as the socio-cultural context of self-killing as an alternative moral course of action to death at the hands of others is depicted in Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*. The moral integrity of Kurunmi, the eponymous hero, to uphold what is morally acceptable in the old feudal system is one of his motivations to suicide. On the other hand, his obsession to retain an age-long custom in the presence of telling change and reality drives him to take his own life. The cause of his suicide is not only based on the loss of honour and fear of social ostracism, but also on his sense of guilt at the death of his warrior followers.

The play *Kurunmi* deals with the historical occurrence in the Old Oyo Empire that leads to the tragic ending of Kurunmi the Generalissimo of the Yoruba Empire and feudal lord of Ijaiye land. Disapproving the authority of Alaafin Atiba to impose on the empire as a successor to his seat Aremo Adelu, his first-born who according to custom must commit compulsory suicide at the death of his father, Kurunmi refuses to acknowledge the Kingship of Adelu and discredits him as an impostor. While Kurunmi stands against the flaw and misuse of power in the new convention, Adelu enjoys the loyalty of Ibadan military lords spearheaded by Ibikunle. Kurunmi is forewarned:

KURUNMI: We have tradition. Whenever an Alaafin dies, his first son, that Alaafin's first son, must also die with him. Is that not part of our tradition, nor am I sick in the head?

- OLUYOLE: It is so but –
KURUNMI: That is all. Atiba dies this evening, his first son Adelu dies by midnight. We bury them both: everybody is happy.
TIMI: But Kurunmi our brother, you seem to forget that –
KURUNMI: There has been no exception to the rule, and Wealthy Atiba can't now corrupt us to grant him a special favour. Atiba dies, Adelu – wo!
TIMI: You forget that time passes and the ways of men must change with time.
KURUNMI: We have tradition, and tradition is tradition. Laws of our fathers tested and hallowed by the ways of men, live on. That is tradition.
OLUYOLE: Tradition adapts.
KURUNMI: To what?
TIMI: To times. (Rotimi 1979, p. 19–20)

The 'life's truth' that tradition adjusts to times is subjective to Kurunmi. In his moral outrage then, he revolts against the unruly monarchical structure. While on the surface his indignation becomes the central theme of the play, it is exactly in the complexity of the acknowledged tradition that his tragedy lies – suicide, according to tradition, is an appropriate alternative to a charge of treason or defeat in a war for Generalissimos of the Yoruba Empire. Kurunmi's obsessive concern is once questioned by his warrior entourages:

- KURUNMI: I lead wrongly?
AMODU: You have become too powerful my lord.
FANYAKA: You lord it over everybody, over everything.
EPO: You are even Chief Priest to all the gods; look at them, Sango, Ogun, Oya, Orunmila. All of them, the gods of our fathers are now your personal property.
AKIOLA: Like clothing, you use them to your taste; tired of one, you pass it to your brother Popoola, who now owns the Egungun cult.
AMODU: You have grown too powerful, my lord. (Rotimi 1979, p. 39)

The contempt at his high-handedness and possessiveness invariably makes his followers defy his wise counsel not to cross the River Ose to the side of Ibadan warriors, their arch-enemies.

- KURUNMI: When a leader of men has led his people to disaster, and what remains of his present life is but a shadow of his proud past, then it is time to be leader no more. (Rotimi 1979, p. 93)

Dissatisfied with his loss, Kurunmi poisons himself. In this case, egocentric interest and noble virtues are the overriding motivations to his self-imposed death.

A related phenomenon takes place in Ama Ata Aidoo's tragic play *Anowa* (1980), which is said to have been based upon a Ghanaian legend about the stubborn conviction of Anowa, daughter of Osam to see nothing pervasive in defying the collective wisdom of the people she seeks to honour. Aidoo's *Anowa* deals with the inner conflicts or sorrow of the woman whose marital life and feminine submissiveness to her

husband Kofi Ako leads to a life of frustration and social ostracism. Infatuated with Kofi Ako, Anowa fails to see that his engagement in the occult, lacks moral integrity and he displays greed which turns into an obsession; he sees buying and selling of men and women as the most lucrative enterprise to release him from his life of poverty. While Anowa in her feminine concern sees slavery as morally unacceptable, Kofi Ako sees in it a welcoming social idea. He argues the importance of making slaves of others to enrich oneself because ‘they are not expensive’ (Aidoo 1980, p. 29).

ANOWA: ... Kofi, no man made a slave of his friend and came to mock himself. It is wrong. It is evil (Aidoo 1980, p. 32).

Anowa’s inner conflict at having no child of her own while she is the sole owner of the young boys and girls around her that are bought as slaves in her household torments her. When Kofi Ako himself no longer finds consolation in his fortune, having used his manhood to acquire slaves and wealth, he seeks to send Anowa away, not only because she is barren but also on the accusation that she is a witch since she does not ‘care to live or behave like everybody else.’ Anowa, at the climax of the play, comes to realize fully the import of Kofi Ako’s obsession and moral decadence in the pursuit of undue status:

ANOWA: Now I know. So that is it. My husband is a woman now. ... He is a corpse. He is dead wood. But less than dead wood because at least, that sometimes grows mushrooms (Aidoo 1980, p. 33).

This telling exposition results in a desire for death; senility, like barrenness, is a social stigma. Kofi Ako shoots himself in shame for having lost his innocence and Anowa, bereaved at her husband’s death, drowns herself.

In Mohammed Ben Abdallah’s *The Fall of Kumbi* (1989), a desire to keep her virginity from being violated makes Khunata the Princess of the sacked Kumbi Saleh to commit sacrificial suicide. In order to escape the humiliation of being forcibly taken to wife by the moor Ibn Yacin the leader of the Marabouts who, under the pretence of fighting a just cause against ‘the strange images and idols worshipped by these savages,’ raises Kumbi to dust, Khunata chooses to end her own life rather than satisfy Yacin’s sexual longing for her:

IBN YACIN: The travellers did not lie about the beauty of the mad black princess. You are beautiful. How old are you?

KHUNATA: Twenty-two years. ... I believe.

IBN YACIN: Twenty-two years ... and still a virgin. Is that true too?

KHUNATA: Khunata is an instrument of the gods. My body is a sacred ground where the gods of my people commune with the priests of my people. No man touches what only the gods possess.

IBN YACIN: You have a lot to learn, young woman. There is no god, but Allah and Mohammed is his messenger. Your first lesson, woman of Kumbi, don’t ever forget it! (Abdallah 1989, p. 102)

Her vengeful spirit and stoic belief in chastity make her detest being merchandized for the Arab slavers. She impales herself to death with a long wooden phallus ‘big enough to kill an elephant’ (Abdallah 1989, p. 121). Her self-sacrifice being ritualistic is

ominously mysterious. It is meant to precipitate a sense of communal pride in the midst of the war-torn black empires. Khunata considers her suicide as a destiny to fulfil for 'a new generation of black men in strange lands who shall be the beginning of the end of a civilization that has bathed the world in blood, and thrived on the ruins of the human soul' (Abdallah 1989, p. 118). Thus her suicide is heroic as well as symbolic. Apparently, this theme holds for many of the reasons behind the death-aspirations in the selected African plays. The dark agony of the tragic characters is one of fused consciousness, a moment when death is envisioned as the appropriate alternative to life.

In Oladejo Okediji's *Rere Run* (1973), Lawuno, the committed union leader, vehemently rejected the money collected by his poverty-stricken, over-exploited worker colleagues for legal services in connection with his case with the management. The money is kept with his wife, Morenike, before its return to the union. She encounters con men who promised to double the money for her. Thinking the windfall would be a great help to her husband in the circumstances, she succumbs to the trick and is promptly swindled. Morenike courageously takes an overdose of analgesic.

In Ladipo's *Oba Ko So* (1972), Sango is desolate and shorn of all his accustomed royal splendour. To arrest this seemingly irreversible trend, he hangs himself and metamorphoses into a deity. In his new status, he unashamedly demands his earlier perquisites and accoutrements: 'Citizens of Oyo and natives of the land of Yorubas worship me from today on! I shall help you. ... I shall help you!' (Ladipo 1972, p. 141).

Ojuala in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to blame* uses a dagger as a weapon to kill herself on discovery she has been the wife, and mother of the children of her own son. What elicits the motivations to suicide can be said to go beyond religious resignation; there is a cultural attitude to it. The audacious aspirations for honour and nobility which are elements of the archetypal hero's life underlie the reasons for the self-imposed death plays of African descent.

The ritual and cultural politics of suicide in *Death and the King's Horseman*

Ritual is arguably a universal feature of human social existence. The practice of ritual takes its cornerstone from anthropological roots. The classical works of scholars like; Emile Durkheim through Gregory Bateson, Claude Levi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, and Victor Turner demonstrates an infinitely perplexing and fascinating aspect of human life (Hicks 2010). Societies around the world share unique and differing thoughts of ritual as a defining characteristic of the people. Quite loosely, the word 'ritual' often commonly brings to mind exoticized images of primitive others diligently engaged in mystical activities. However, one can find ritual both sacred and secular throughout 'modern' society (Rosati 2012). One thing to note is that, ritual is an inevitable constituent of culture, ranging from the largest-scale social and political processes to the most familiar aspects of our self-experience. Yet within the universality of the practice of ritual, the inherent multiplicity of ritual practices, both between and within cultures, also reflects the full diversity of the human experience.

In Africa, the practice of ritual is one that is largely associated and inseparable to their belief system. One phenomenon that commonly associates itself to the African ritual is the phenomenon of death. This is so because death rituals in Africa are deeply rooted in the cultural beliefs, traditions and indigenous religions of the continent. The death ritual in Africa is guided by Africans' view of existence after death

and the power and role of the deceased ancestor. The belief sees that the physical and the spiritual interact with each other and in the process, utilitarian benefits are derived. A ritual is able to illuminate a spiritual reality that determines the pulse and patterns of everyday life by expressing the spiritual cosmology of a people. Rituals in traditional African societies provide the avenue of getting direct access to gods or spirits or whichever that is applicable to confirming social values. Ritual is often regarded, as a transcendental act because it begins with an earthly procession, then into a spiritual transformation and finally travels through the spirit realm; thereby affirming the connection between man and his gods (Turner 2011).

In traditional societies, the practice of ritual constituted an intrinsic and essential part of a cultural dominant. Ritual was used as an intricate tool of cultural and political reproduction employed by the dominant groups or elite members of society. It was an obvious expectation arising from the superannuation of the primitive mode of production in Western societies, that the practice of ritual itself would have lost its power and social efficacy. It is of course sensible to observe that, the development of ritual cannot be divorced from the gains of the enlightenment and the triumph of rationality. According to Williams (1993) in about the eighteenth century, scientific reasoning has gained ascendancy over the imaginative apprehension of reality. Such ascendancy he adds reflected the triumph of the bourgeois worldview in Europe and elsewhere. The bourgeois worldview that dominated Europe received its classic formulation from Karl Marx. He concludes that all mythology attempts at overcoming, shaping as well as dominating the forces of nature. However, these forces through the power of imagination tend to disappear as soon as man gains mastery over the forces of nature.

Drawing from another dimension, it is obvious that within the context of post-colonial cultural politics, the concept of ritual tends to be absorbed as a casualty of linguistic imperialism. Ritual has been viewed in this circumstance as a completely Eurocentric term which its historical development seems to negate a compelling departure of its space. As such, such industrial and scientific reasoning has placed ritual at the pejorative interpretation of a meaningless exercise and a mundane routine between western societies and the emergent postcolonial cultures of the third world (Dowling 1984). This argument however, seem to fade away in an African discourse where the centrality of ritual is inseparable to the people and where it serves an ultimate connection with the universe. This line of thought espouses further the argument that rituals are an expression of human needs and desires. In Africa, rituals are instrumental in satisfying such human needs and desires. Because the human need is vast and varied, there are establishments of several prototypes of rituals to take care of them (Eck 2002). Importantly, the close feature of African rituals is the fact that they are not devoid of sacrifices, especially human sacrifices in its most extreme form.

Human sacrifice itself has constituted an advanced phenomenon of explanation. Such explanation operates within the discussions that human sacrifice provides the need for a re-actualization of direct relations between a people and their god to a drive towards seasonal regeneration of sacred forces. Although this form of undeniably harsh ritual may vary from place to place, it however serves the function of the social needs of the people.

Undoubtedly, the disparity that exists on the depth of interpretation of ritual between African writers and that of Western cultural hegemony has enjoyed a sense

of critical clarification. Such writers as Achebe Chinua in his masterpiece *Things Fall Apart* (1958) exposes the suicide of Okonkwo as a complex ritual of atonement and a reassertion of the collective will of the people. Also, in Laye's (1970) *The Radiance of the King*, there is an indication of an ideological simulation of ritual suicide in the fate of Clarence. These indications suggest an episode of nothing less than the deployment of ritual in a desperate cultural offensive. The mythicization of some of the historical events by prominent African writers establishes a renewed attempt at discovering what is authentically African.

The ritual suicide represented in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* enables another understanding of the Yoruba belief systems and values. In addition, the cultural politics that surrounds the act of suicide in the play will enable yet another understanding.

In Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, the ritual suicide expected to be carried out by Elesin is one that stands to serve as a passage to the spiritual realm. Elesin as a central character and the king's horseman must prepare for the ritual to appear through the passage, supposedly in his preparation to transit from an earthly existence into the life beyond. Elesin represents therefore the supreme human symbol as his expected suicide is meant to ease the passage of the late *Oba* into the world of his ancestors. In addition, the suicide of Elesin is meant to equilibrate the forces of life and that of death among his people. Closely followed by Elesin is the Praise singer who in the later part of the play transits between his human self and the spirit of the late *Oba*, as occasion demands. The interference of the praise singer to the ritual suicide of Elesin is designed to slow Elesin down from hurrying to the tryst where it is said, 'the cockerel needs no adornment.' (Soyinka 1975, p. 4) The two acts that can constitute the tryst are; of lovemaking and the other, the act of dying. Dramatically, both acts happen to Elesin, but the first is his initial act of failure, which automatically affects the second and renders it ineffectual when it eventually happens. Elesin's suicide therefore becomes questionable in a situation where he is engaged in passing through sexual ecstasy instead of a spiritual bliss that is his lot. His suicide at the end of the day appears to be ineffective and lacks significance in the communal life of his people since it was not targeted towards the spiritual essence that it was meant to serve. Elesin already forewarns his inordinate love for women:

In all my life, as a Horseman of the King, the juiciest fruit on every tree was mine, I saw, I touched, I wooed, and rarely was the answer no. The honour of my place, the veneration I received in the eye of man and woman that tree prospered my suit and played havoc with my sleeping hours. And they tell me my eyes were a hawk in perpetual hunger. Split an Iroko tree in two, hide a woman's beauty in its heartwood and seal it up again, Elesin, journeying by, would make his camp beside that tree of all the shades in the forest ... (Soyinka 1975, pp. 18–19)

Irrespective of the above and in whatever circumstance of Elesin's death, he has been recognized to represent the ritual or sacred time for his people. He is the vehicle between his people and the spirit of their late *oba* and god. Most importantly, in Yoruba metaphysics, the life and existence of certain individuals is one that is integral to the universe of the Yoruba world and as such, he has a vital role to play in sustaining the endless cord. This is why Elesin's role and duty to commit suicide and join his king in the afterlife becomes a central function in the play and in the universe of the Yoruba mind. His eventual death by suicide is one that comes with happiness and celebration.

Not from Elesin alone but the entire community who are meant to believe that his death will be the unification of the cosmos. Moreover, Elesin having embraced the pleasure of life (sex, food, glory, affluence) is also ready to embrace death. It is no denying the fact that, Elesin as an individual belongs to the elite class and is governed by the privileges of his status. Apart from been the king's assistance, Elesin enjoys the political benefit of his position which are measures that will endear and qualify him for the task he has taken oath to implement. For Soyinka to therefore separate himself from Marxism as identified by Stratton (1988) is to implicate his characters who exhibit such tendencies and characteristics. The life and the suicide of Elesin therefore have particular meaning and precise significance within a self-sustaining universe. While he addresses the market women in the opening scene, Elesin illustrates this meaning:

Our acts should have meaning. The sap of the plantain never dries. You have seen the young shoot swelling. Even as the parent stalk begins to wither. Women, let my going be likened to the twilight hour of the plantain. (Soyinka 1975, p. 20)

This image created by Elesin is one, which is very important to the play. The statement also appears in the closing scene and describes the organic interdependence as well as the regenerative dynamism that exist in the Yoruba world-view. Soyinka reinterprets and presents the scenario as a plausible and effective system of thought for attempting to comprehend the mysteries of birth, life and death.

More so, the suicide of Olunde and Elesin in the play is hinged in the conflict between the Yoruba worldview and the British (Western) civilization. The conflict is precipitated when the British District Officer, Simon Pilkings decides to imprison Elesin due to his lack of knowledge about the culture of the Yoruba people and what the suicide of Elesin represents. Elesin's eldest son Olunde returns from England to Nigeria where he went to study medicine on hearing of the king's death. He returns to Nigeria because he understands the culture and is aware that the king's death also means the subsequent ritual suicide of his father, in which he is obliged to come and bury his father's corps. However, when he returns he finds out that his father has not performed the ritual suicide as custom demands. This failure means ultimately that the eldest son of the king's horseman will have to commit suicide. Olunde therefore decides to commit suicide in place of his father in order to save the shame and complete the ritual. One would think here that, Olunde having been exposed to supposedly enlighten modern ideas will oppose such a practice. However, Olunde resolves the possible conflict that would have escalated by committing suicide and saving himself of the shame of having a weak father. His father too seeing that his son has done what he could not do decides to commit suicide. However, the suicide committed by Elesin at the end of the day is not targeted towards the communal ritual of his people; rather his suicide represents one of self-disappointment and a betrayal of his people's trust. Knowing that he cannot stand the shame, especially with the complete loss of his eldest son, life will have become meaningless, hence the resort to suicide. Although the two suicide acts presented by Soyinka in this play are of two levels. On the first level, it is metaphysical and on the second level, it is physical. One will observe that none of the suicide serves the purpose which the world of the play does not imply it to serve nor which the culture of the people expects it to be. Having tampered with the forces in the chthonic realms of

transition by the unfulfilled ritual suicide of Elesin, the ideological shift is now towards the physical that calls for sympathy for the suicide of Olunde, Elesin's son. In as much as his suicide will not serve the purpose of the ritual, we are left to acknowledge his unflinching respect for his tradition. Added to this, the suicide of Olunde shows the extent he is willing to go to preserve his family honour. The people and the audience therefore receive Olunde's suicide as honourable, heroic and courageous and therefore wish that the act complimented the purpose of the Yoruba universe, transition. On the contrary, Elesin's suicide disconnects itself from the ritual and tends to connect more sympathetically to the suicide of his son. For Elesin to finally commit the act of suicide after the actual ritual becomes unfortunate since the act of suicide takes place at the end of the day without fulfilling its purpose.

There is an obvious element of cultural politics that also surround the suicide of Elesin. The position of Elesin in the Kingdom of Oyo Empire as the king's horseman is one that can be likened to a vice-president, a personal adviser, etc. His position is therefore a very influential one and represents a bourgeois status. The benefits of his position are one that is incomparable to the normal life of a commoner. His position and privileges are not different from what it is in contemporary politics. Those occupying such political position tend to live larger and in total affluence of the people's wealth whom they are supposed to serve. Ironically, such privileges are products of the efforts of the people, which they closely amass and use for their benefit. Elesin after enjoying such privileges on the day of his ritual performance still decides to take for himself a bride. Even when he is cautioned that his intended bride is betrothed, Elesin grows rather angry. He uses the privilege of his office and the ritual he is about to perform as an instrument through which he endears the people and community to. The conversation that ensues reveals clearly Elesin's emotional reaction when he seems challenged by his choice of a bride:

Elesin: What! Where do you all say I am?

Iyaloja: Still among the living

Elesin: and that radiance which so suddenly lit up this market I could boast I knew so well?

Iyaloja: Has one step already in her husband's home. She is betrothed

Elesin [irritated]: Why do you tell me that?

Iyaloja: Not because we dare give you offence Elesin. Today is your day and the whole world is yours. Still, even those who leave town to make a new dwelling elsewhere like to be remembered by what they leave behind. (Soyinka 1975, p. 20)

Elesin seems to use the advantage of his ritual to woe a new bride despite the danger it will have to the ritual he is about to perform. This attempt indicates the political tendencies imbued in his character. When Elesin finally commits suicide, he does so not only because of his son's death but because he has succeeded in disappointing the people, he represents. The existence of Elesin after his failure to perform the ritual suicide will mean that he will not be exposed to the same privilege that was his lot when he served as the king's horseman. The suicide of his son is only a contributory factor that assists him to commit his own part of suicide.

The question that arises at the end of the day is that, if the Yoruba worldview sees each individual as important and central to the universe of the Yoruba mind, does it

accord a commoner the same essence in its universe? This is because the suicide in the play is hatched from the elite class who represent the aristocracy. The play does nothing to suggest whether the life of a proletariat is capable of fulfilling the cosmic totality in the Yoruba realms of transition. The ritual is undoubtedly created to favour the elite class who are aware that the act of suicide comes with it affluence, respect and vitality. Eagleton's (1976) Marxist literary criticism classifies such tendencies as capitalist and an establishment of the base and superstructure. The superstructure always creates workable instruments that legitimizes their power and keeps them in constant domination of the lower class. Jameson (1981) in his political unconscious also expresses the cultural political buried narrative of a text. These buried narratives are evident in the character of Elesin and the ritual suicide that defines the worldview of the Yoruba people. If not the life of a commoner should also be enough to confirm social responsibility and function both creatively and realistically to a people's norms and values especially as it appertains to Yoruba cosmology.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of suicide as a theme in most dramatic texts of African authors lack a sustained interest as a subject of inquiry. Added to this, the opposing views of African thoughts and reception to suicide with Western epistemology provide a sense of critical reflection into the representation of suicide in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. This has been clearly demonstrated in this article as one of its critical questions. The potential contribution of this study lies in its dedicated focus on suicide in Yoruba culture understood from a socio-historical point view as represented in Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman* and other plays of Yoruba extraction. This will add to a growing corpus of critical reflection on suicide and elaborate an epistemological base for understanding Yoruba belief systems and values. This study therefore provides an essential perspective for other scholars to look at this phenomenon as important, especially in its cultural understanding and social relevance in a people's custom and tradition, a perception at odds with western hegemonic value systems and legal jurisprudence.

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