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**The Pull of Tradition in Wole Soyinka's Drama: A Textual
Study of the *Lion and the Jewel*, *The Strong Breed*, and *Death*,
and *The King's Horseman***

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Abstract

The white missionaries and other western agents that invaded Africa during the period of the scramble for the continent came face to face with traditional and cultural practices which were inimical to their belief system. This resulted in a clash of the two cultures. This study presents instances of this conflict in Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, *The Strong Breed* and *Death, and the King's Horseman*. Instances of the cultural conflicts are presented and analysed with a view to determining the extent and effect of the clash on the two cultures. Findings reveal an overriding influence of traditional custom, norms and values over the western civilizing mission. At the end of the stories, African traditional values triumph over modernity. The pull of tradition over western values which started in *The Lion and the Jewel* is perfected in the third play. It is finally suggested that whereas the ugly aspects of the two cultures should be discarded, their good aspects should be retained for the achievement of a harmonious and balanced society.

Introduction

At the advent of the missionaries and western administration in Africa, certain ambiances that defined African cultures were taken as uncivilized culture. Hence, the colonial agenda carries the supposition of a civilizing mission. Many efforts aimed at indoctrination of indigenous peoples by the West took varying forms.

The apparent paradox, arising from insensitivity to intercultural differences, inherent in the assumption of the West has been the focus of many creative writers. Their aim to reconstitute what appears a misrepresentation of Africa's ecosemiosis, which is the result of man's relation to what the environment has proposed along with erstwhile tradition, is the focus of this paper. These cultural indices along with a given response to the environment are bound to define another understanding from the experiences of the West's ecosemiosis. In this regard, I explore the contexts of Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, *The Strong Breed* and *Death, and the King's Horseman* as a response in anti-colonial literature to the paradox of colonialism. In these plays, "Soyinka has helped us to reintegrate us into the world of our ancestors" (Femi Osofisan 153). This is in line with Soyinka's belief that "A concern with culture ... strengthens society" (21).

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In the three plays, he presents stories in which tradition and cultural practices take their rightful places in life and the belief-system of the indigenous people. Irrespective of their western orientation, Lakunle is not only disgraced by traditional values and Eman's blood finds him to fulfil his traditional role to the people, but most importantly, Mr. Simon Pilkings is subdued by tradition and his hope for the civilizing mission, Olunde, turns around to embrace and die for it.

Jones states that Soyinka's plays "are concerned with the fate of man in his environment, the struggle for survival; the cost of survival; the real meaning of progress; the role of death – even the necessity for death in man's life" (64-5).

The Lion and the Jewel belongs to the early works of Wole Soyinka. The period must have accounted for the clash of tradition and modernity discernible in the play. The plot centres on a beautiful village virgin, Sidi, desired by Lakunle and Baroka. Lakunle, the torchbearer of modernity from Ilujinle who is in love with Sidi clashes with the uneducated but foxy old Bale of the village, Baroka, who also wants her. The play therefore becomes an amusing struggle between these rivals who represent the old and new orders. *The Lion and the Jewel* is therefore, a satire, a literary mode that "has fascinated Soyinka throughout his literary career" (Adrian Roscoe 227).

Lakunle is a fervent apostle of romantic love, supposedly a recent western idea introduced into West African societies and champion of all those freedoms for which the feminists have struggled against such as disrespect for and the dignity of womanhood. He sketches for his beloved, the splendid life she will enjoy if only she would consent to marrying him (without his paying the traditional bride price). As Dathorne puts it, “The pedantic school master’s ideas of what is “civilized” are truly laughable” (101).

Sidi is disgusted with this “strange unhealthy mouthing”. She prefers feasible actions such as paying the bride price and physical touch to the ranting of a “neurotic” suitor. Oyin Ogunba states that Sidi “would feel honoured to be married to Lakunle, but she expects him to perform the proper traditional rites, especially the bride price” (32). Dathorne also states that Sidi “agrees to marry Lakunle (only) if he will pay the bride price” (334). These the old ruler of the village was prepared to offer which makes him win her hand in marriage. The conflict is therefore between the champions of the two worlds of tradition and modernity. The spokesperson of tradition wins the fight while the modernized Lakunle loses out and makes himself a laughing stock in Ilujinle. Roscoe writes that the conflict in this play “is between the champions of two worlds, (Lakunle and Baroka) and Baroka, the spokesman of tradition, wins the fight; the modern, western representative not only loses but is the laughing stock of the play” (241-2).

An angle to this theme is the unceasing pull of traditional values against modern western tendencies. This pull is manifest in many episodes and scenes in the play. At the beginning of the play, we realize that Lakunle, an educated Youngman of Ilujinle returns to tradition in sitting his school in the centre of the village that houses the arena, and lusts after a village girl instead of a city woman. This pull also manifests when the Baroka bribes a white surveyor and makes him abandon the building of a planned motor and rail roads in order to maintain his traditional hold on modernity to tradition. Lakunle was also later to swear by heaven, earth, and their forces when he realizes that the Baroka has tampered with Sidi’s virginity. The act of swearing is common with the natives and non-Christians and one expects an enlightened man to shun this traditional act. In allowing himself to be pulled to act the stranger in the “Dance of the Traveller”, Lakunle once more brings civilization on its knees especially when one realizes that the order comes from Sidi whom he had seen as primitive and uncouth. This act also amounts to subsuming the modern to the forces of tradition.

Ogude opines thus: “In *The Lion and the Jewel*, Soyinka presents the Bale, the very epitome of an exploitative tradition who outmaneuvers the naively romantic Lakunle and the simple-minded Sidi only to enrich his harem” (164). This thinking is corroborated by Nkosi when he asserts that *The Lion and the Jewel*

Tells the story of an ageing chief, a reactionary old lecher who, against all the expectations of modern audiences grown accustomed to witnessing the triumph of the new against the old Africa, wins a local belle from his rival, a progressive but ineffectual school teacher (187).

The traditional element used by the playwright also reinforces the pull of tradition over modernity in the play. The story is a celebration of dancing, singing, drumming and wrestling. Roscoe sees it as “a lively combination of dancing, singing and drumming”. He makes his opinion clearer: “A particular memorable feature is the Dance of the Lost Traveller, a re-enactment in mime form of an important event occurring prior to the time of the play” (245). Other activities associated with tradition such as the game of “ayo” and bull-roaring embellish the setting of the play. It is set in an African village rather than one of Africa’s modernized towns or cities. The Odan tree dominates the geographical setting with the bush school only flanking the stage on the right. The school is yet to occupy the centre stage of village life and cannot yet provide with its mechanical chanting of the ‘arithmetic times’, a substitute for the established traditional nuances of village life. The second setting Baroka’s bedroom, also inclines to this situation.

Roscoe adds “combines with traditional practice when the ladies dance the history of Baroka’s sex life and the villagers perform the Dance of the Lost Traveller” (247). Of the four main characters, two – Baroka and Sadiku – are old; the other two – Lakunle and Sidi – are young. At the beginning of the play, the first pair represent inviolable tradition and the other pair represent an emergent modernity.

This kind of character delineation gives the impression that the playwright pitches two rival forces to do battle. In the ensuing struggle, a member of the modern group, Sidi, defects to the side of tradition thus, creating an imbalance leading to a temporary defeat of modernism. The acceptance of the old over the young suggests Sidi’s inclination to the

notion of a happy, ideal community in which both young and old cooperate to improve society, a commitment to a place where rich decay is perennially used as compost to fertilise the land instead of being wantonly destroyed as waste, a framework which provides for the judicious interaction of youthful vision and the wisdom of age” (Oyin Ogunba 39)

Lakunle the chief representative of modern values also allows himself to be pulled by tradition, thereby establishing the downgrading of an emergent modernity at the advantage of tradition. Ogunba maintains thus: “Lakunle can only think of the barbarism of Ilujinle and nothing of the values enshrined in her culture”. He continues:

“indeed, he wants his own native culture completely obliterated, superseded by the so-called higher culture of the West” (35). He reiterates:

Since it is the fripperies of modern European life that tend to fascinate him, he ... become(s) spiritually arid... Thus a situation is created in which a girl of seventeen rejects a man of twenty-three, a bachelor and a modern progressive ... to marry an old man of sixty-two who has a great many wives and many sons and daughters much more older than herself (37).

This can only mean that “Lakunle’s style in *The Lion and the Jewel* is a clear window through which we can see his worthless values ...” and that the style given to Lakunle represents a deliberate attempt to reflect the encroachment of western values upon African mores” (240).

The language of Lakunle and Baroka also attests to the divide in the play. Lakunle is verbose, relying so much on his “insane” rantings while the Bale’s language has sureness and solidity. He embellishes his language with proverbs, wise sayings, and a semi-heroic and emotive pattern of language. The Bale also transliterates the English Language. The above evidences are strengthened by the structural division of the play into Morning, Noon and Night, which is a traditional interpretation of time. In all facets of the play therefore, the supremacy of tradition over modern values is strong.

The Strong Breed is about an annual end-of-year rejuvenation rite which has the ritual act of the carrier as its most important feature. The carrier as practiced in this community is usually chosen from among strangers who will be tortured, humiliated and hanged on the New Year’s Eve as against what obtains in Eman’s place where a particular family constitutes the strong breed and acts the scapegoat to atone for the sins of the community. The carrier take to the river before midnight, all the sins and filth of the community during the past year. *The Strong Breed* Roscoe agrees, is “a dark powerful moving play built around the scapegoat idea” (246). For Chris Egharevba, Soyinka sees the carrier ritual in the play “as a purgation of society from moral chaos, as a soul-searching method for a society that requires self-examination” (26).

There are only two strangers in the community, Ifada, an idiot-boy who seems the community’s choice, and Eman. However, from the beginning of the play, we are made to know that Eman possesses the blood of the foredoomed and as such, that he might inevitably become the carrier. The play opens with Sunma, who feels an overwhelming presentiment of this evil attempting to convince Eman with whom she has been living with to leave the village on the last day of the year. For the first time, she brutally turns the idiot-boy out of their house so that he might be made the carrier, but neither her pleas nor an unusually cruel attitude to Ifada convince Eman to leave. In an attempt to save Ifada, Eman is forced to take his place and ends up dying, thereby

submitting to his fate which he had earlier on rejected as a result of his western education. Ogunba submits: “Eman is one of the ‘new men’ produced by the contemporary acculturation process”. He is not “deserving of respect but as a kind of parasite who has to be destroyed if the community is to grow properly” because he “is an anticipated man, without superstition...” (110).

The inability of Eman to escape as a carrier could be linked to the pull of tradition that had willed his family’s fate, confirmed by his father. As he himself puts it, “I am very much my father’s son” (126). He ends up the way of his forebears because he belongs to the lineage of the strong breed. Jones opines that long after running away from his community, Eman finally offers “himself as a victim to be sacrificed in another community) – a role he had declared himself unfitted for”. Even when his father tries to divert him “from the path of martyrdom by pointing in the opposite direction”, he “follows his father to the symbolic river to the real trap” to make “the supreme sacrifice” (56). Carley sums it up thus:

Now in the final vision the link of the strong breed is complete as father and son meet as carriers; the father who has been carrier for twenty years and is courageous facing his last journey and the son who is carrying out his first and last task as carrier (340).

Inherent in the above exposition is again, the pull of tradition. Not even an escape from one’s village could hide one from this duty if he was a strong breed. Good enough, there are no western laws or law officers to interrupt a ritual sacrifice, as we shall see in *Death and the King’s Horseman*. The issue here is therefore not that of rivalry between two opposing forces, but the insistence on tradition without escape.

Ogunyemi asserts that “In his presentation, Soyinka superimposes African religion on Christian mythology each vying for supremacy in a rather disconcerting manner” (31). The critic insists that in presenting the people with “a new religion and a new way of life ... Soyinka makes a swipe at the romantic conception of the primitive and innocent African rural society waiting anxiously for the civilizing influences of Christianity” and in resisting “the incursion of foreign religion and ideas ... He presents us instead with (a) complex society, trying to achieve its mundane aspirations” (29).

Time in this play is non-linear, an African traditional perception. One does not therefore read of lineal progression of time in which events follow each other in a chronological order. The incidents about Eman’s carrier history are structured in such a manner that the usual lineal distinction between time past and present is obliterated. Another meaning to the non-linear concept of time is that both the past and the future exist in the present as in *Death and the King’s Horseman*. In these plays, tradition pulls both the past and the future to the present. Everybody in the village is involved in the sacrificial rite because it is for expiation. Even a strange idiot carries a basket of oranges

to identity with it while Mister Eman, the representative of modern values becomes a carrier.

The day starts at dusk and goes on up until midnight on the night of the rite of passage. It is therefore enshrined in tradition in both time and occasion. Most traditional rites and rituals take place at night, particularly at midnight, which is also the case in this play.

Traditional images and elements abound in the play to advance the place of tradition. The boat image, the effigy, ayo game and others are used for this effect. Dancing and masquerading come in as handy accoutrements. Sunma wants Ifada out of her house on the eve of the New Year because as a woman, an idiot or misshape should not come near her. A sick girl also drags an effigy along believing the superstition that it will cleanse her of her sickness. The effigy is believed to cure its owner of his or her sickness at midnight. All the characters in the play are involved in the rite and outside Eman who is given the Jesus name of Emmanuel (God with us), and the unnamed tutor, all other characters are given native names. In *The Strong Breed* therefore, more than even in *The Lion and the Jewel*, there is the dominance of tradition and the society is pulled by it one way or the other.

In *Death, and the King's Horseman*, Elesin Oba, the chief horseman of the late Alafin prepares to join his master one month after his death. Unlike other animals and birds that answer "Not I" to death, the Elesin rather rejoices in dying and makes his preparation to leave the human world and transit to the world of the dead for purposes of continuation of existence.

Here as in *The Strong Breed*, Soyinka is again dealing with the belief that "society seasonally accumulates a burden of guilt and sin dangerous to its health and sanity and which can be purged only through the shedding of blood" (Femi Osofisan 163). This agrees with the thinking of Jones that society is "in continual need of salvation from itself". He reasons further that "This act of salvation is not a mass act; it comes about through the vision and dedication of individuals who doggedly pursue their vision" and "frequently end up as the victims of the society which benefits from their vision" (11). His traditional role of dying with his master having lived together, eaten together the best of meals, the juiciest of fruits, and the most beautiful of women is therefore seen by tradition as a continuation of the company they kept in the world of the living. This role, which had been performed by his predecessors was however to run into a hitch with his delay over the vomit of this earth (the new bride) which leads to the arrival of Simon Pilkings who arrests him. This sets off the major conflict in the play between tradition and modernity represented by Elesin and Pilkings respectively who had clashed four years earlier over the western education of the Elesin's son, Olunde.

In spite of the initial success of sending Olunde to England to study medicine against the wish of Chief Elesin, he loses the war on both fronts at last, manifesting in the death of Elesin and the sudden appearance of Olunde from England (which represents an abandonment of modernity and civilization) to step into his father's position and duty. He commits the suicide his father (who was then in Pilkings's detention) should have in order to save tradition. Elesin also strangles himself in the prison when his son's corpse is presented to him. Osofisan opines that "As in *The Strong Breed*, it is death that wins, for even now (at death) Elesin is still accorded his befitting respects and the community, appeased at last can turn its mind towards the future" (170). Death, he reiterates, "remains a celebration purely in traditional ritual terms" (174).

Through the death of Olunde, the pull of tradition against modernity becomes complete with the unborn child by Elesin's new bride promising a continuation of the status quo. The play is therefore, a celebration of transition. This is in line with the thinking of Gbilekaa that "Ranging from *A Dance of the Forest to Death, and the King's Horseman*, the dramatic action (Soyinka's) is played on the backdrop of supernatural forces" (16).

The time setting of the play like that of the other two is during the traditional favoured night period, this time, from dusk to dawn. This traditional belief is also observable in the symbolic mating of Elesin with the virgin at the market place. He pleads: "Let seed that will not serve the stomach on the way remain behind. Let it take root in the earth of my choice, in this earth I leave behind" (160).

As the play progresses, Amusa a black trusted police sergeant of the white government also suffers the pull of tradition. He condemns Pilkings for putting on-the-clothes of "death cult" (164) and insists that Simon takes them off because a man like him should not touch the clothes of "egungun", a masquerade. When his boss refuses, he threatens to withhold his message from him. Osofisan enthuses that Amusa's "lingering superstitiousness provide easy material for fun... as Lakunle of *The Lion and the Jewel*" (172).

Jane, the wife of the District Officer also succumbs to the pull of tradition in the following dialogue with Olunde. Jane: Thank you. I feel calmer. Don't let me keep you from your duties.

Olunde: Goodnight Mrs. Pilkings

Jane: Welcome home (119).

Traditional images such as 'plantain', 'palm oil', 'harmattan', 'egungun', and others combine with such elements as drumming, masquerading, praise singing, slavery, wise sayings, sacrifices, invocation and other rituals to establish the centrality

of tradition in the play. Another traditional feature in the play is the use of proverbs: “Eating the awusa nut is not so difficult as drinking water afterward” (40).

Characters in the play are archetypes. They are therefore more important in their group identity than as individuals. They are guardians of tradition or praise-singers, urging Elesin on to the traffic gulf. In this regard, Iyaloja (mother of the market) and the praise singers recall the group responsibility of the old women in *Madmen* and *Specialists* in which the development of character is subordinated to the development of ideal. The white characters in the play are also entertained by the music and songs of the Africans. Obi Maduakor states that they responded “to the disquieting rhythms of the ritual drums” (281) even in the face of their civilizing mission. More than in either of the other plays, the pull of tradition is more forceful and realistic in *Death, and the King’s Horseman* because the conflict here is better drawn out and the pull more persistent winning over at the end, both the black and white antagonistic characters and values.

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