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"LEADERS AND LEFT-OVERS": A READING OF SOYINKA'S DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN

Mark Ralph-Bowman

> But most of you may face up to the reality, the hard brutal facts of our social and economic reality. You may face up to these honestly, and up to the consequences, as to where your duty and responsibility lies. You may refuse and follow the parade and march-past of all parasitical and retrograde forces into the dung-heap of history.
>
> *Y. B. Usman, 1978*[1]

As the war of Biafran secession receded into the past, Nigerians faced once more the issues they had confronted before the hostilities began in July 1967. In certain senses the scars of the civil war may never be healed, but in others the war changed nothing and the issues facing the nation remained the same. There was the question of federal unity, coupled with the vexed question of religious divisions; the quest for a national language; the return to civilian rule, but perhaps the most important and fundamental to all was the matter of oil revenues and how most productively to use them. This problem of how to distribute wealth was neither unique nor new to Nigeria but, after more than a decade of independence, a reassessment of the situation was in order. At about the time of independence Wole Soyinka had written three plays each of which contributed to the birth of a nation. With the reassertion of one nation implied by the federal victory in the civil war the time was ripe for a review of the ideals and admonitions that had informed *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Lion and the Jewel*, and *The Swamp Dwellers*. Some fourteen years after independence Soyinka goes back to events that occurred fourteen years before it. While too much ought not to be made of this fact it is probably not accidental in the work of a man with as strong a sense of history as Soyinka's. It is difficult to resist the sense of déjà vu in the selection of events in *Death and the King's Horseman*, difficult to resist the conclusion that the forces at work in colonial 1946 are seen by Soyinka to be at work in postcolonial 1974.

A synopsis of the plot of *Death and the King's Horseman* makes the play seem pretty uncomplicated. The king of Oyo has died and the tradition requires his chief horseman, Elesin Oba, to die in order to accompany him on his journey to the world of the ancestors. It is the eve of Elesin Oba's death and there is an atmosphere

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charged with excitement and expectation, such as is appropriate for any significant religious event. On his last day in this life the Horseman can be denied nothing, not even a new bride whose

> wrapper was no disguise
> For thighs whose ripples shamed the river's
> Coils around the hills of Ilesi.[2]

Meanwhile, the English Prince of Wales is visiting the town and the District Officer, Simon Pilkings, is anxious that all goes smoothly. He feels that a ritual suicide by a major figure in the local hierarchy during the Prince's visit would not enhance his career prospects in the colonial service. He decides to intervene. He arrests the Horseman. Olunde, Elesin Oba's son, away in England against his father's wishes, having heard that his father is to die, returns to pay his last respects. The failure of his father to die in the appropriate manner is spiritually and socially disruptive as well as shameful, so Olunde takes his father's place.

It is in the nature of synopses to fail to do justice to the work in question and nowhere is this more true than in this instance. *Death and the King's Horseman* is complex and tightly woven and, as one has come to expect from Soyinka, enigmatic. The enigma of this play is not of Soyinka's making, though it is of his choosing. At the heart of this play is a religious mystery. Not that *Death and the King's Horseman* is a religious treatise but, if one is to appreciate the full significance of the consternation caused by Elesin Oba's failure to "commit death" one has to appreciate something of the cosmology fundamental to the play.

In "The Fourth Stage" and later in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Soyinka explores what he understands to be the relation in Yoruba cosmology between man, the gods, and the ancestors. The essence of this cosmology, as he expounds it, is in direct contradiction to the Christian and European emphasis on the individual and individual salvation. For the Yoruba the emphasis is on community, and community in this context makes no distinction between the dead, the living, and the unborn. The emphasis is on continuity, on maintaining the continuous and contiguous relationship of these three stages of being. All-important in this relationship is the Fourth Stage, which is the vital link between the three stages. Soyinka sees the Fourth Stage in contradistinction with the Christian concept of Death in which man is essentially changed. The Fourth Stage is to Soyinka the world neither of the dead nor of the living; its ineffable nature is

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explored in *Death and the King's Horseman* through the image of the Passage.

The play itself opens with the stage direction "A passage through a market. . . ." Elesin Oba himself first appears along another passage and after his taunting, satirical Not-I Bird dance he calls on all present to (p. 14)

> Watch me dance along the narrowing path
> Glazed by the soles of my great precursors.

His sighting of the young girl and his wish to marry her as his last act in this world precipitates a heated discussion in the course of which the image of the Passage develops from a passage to passage itself, from a route to a process. Elesin Oba commands thus (p. 21):

> All you who stand before the spirit that dares
> The opening of the last door of passage,
> Dare to rid my going of regrets!

Elesin Oba is "the voyager at his passage." He is about to undergo a transition, but it is more subtle than that. He is not only to undergo a transition, to go along the Passage, he is Transition itself, he is the Passage. In accepting that the young girl and Elesin Oba be married, Iyaloja expresses the hope that any child of the union should be (p. 22)

> neither of this world nor of the next. Nor of the one behind us. As if the timelessness of the ancestor world and the unborn have joined spirits to wring an issue of the elusive being of passage . . . Elesin!

When Elesin Oba brings the stained cloth of the marriage bed to Iyaloja as proof of the consummation of the marriage he declares (p. 40)

> It is no mere virgin stain, but the union of life and the seeds of passage . . . When earth and passage wed, the consummation is complete only when there are grains of earth on the eyelids of passage.

Thus the Passage is conceived as both the passing through a stage of existence and that stage of existence itself, it is both passing

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and to pass, both gerund and infinitive. Thus Elesin Oba is both the mediator between the dead and the living as well as mediation itself. He is both act and actor, which brings him paradoxically close to the Christian theology of the relationship between the Father and the Son. Such is the significance of Elesin Oba and his role in the play and this significance explains one reason why the drama should not be trivialized into a matter of "culture conflict."

Elesin Oba, however, fails. This failure does not mean that Soyinka is portraying the collapse of a cosmology or the failure of traditional wisdom or values. As with most tragedy—and several critics of this play gratuitously point out a five-act structure analogous to that of classic western tragedy—one major critical problem posed by the play is to find the affirmation concealed by the disaster. From this play one of the most forceful impressions carried away is that of Elesin Oba's failure. How can failure such as his be understood to be affirmation?

The answer is that the play is not about failure, a fact that becomes clear if the "five-act structure" is ignored and the whole western tradition of individual tragedy forgotten. Soyinka has charged that we should

> suspect all conscious search for the self's authentic being; this is favourite fodder for the enervating tragic Muse. *I do not seek; I find*. Let actions alone be the manifestations of the authentic being in defence of its authentic visions. History is too full of failed prometheans bathing their wounded spirits in the tragic stream.[3]

The structure of *Death and the King's Horseman* is that of two converging movements, one of which begins with Elesin Oba in Act One and follows him through Act Three to Act Five where it fuses with the other which begins in Act Two, proceeds through Act Four and fuses with the first when Olunde replaces Elesin Oba as the being of passage.

The first movement is dominated by Elesin Oba, a dramatic creation unrivalled in African drama beside whom even such a character as Oduwale in Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not To Blame* seems paltry. The ability to bring the character of Elesin Oba off the page and onto the stage will for long be the yardstick of an actor's skill. Elesin dances, boasts, teases, jokes, lusts, and finally despairs his way to dramatic immortality, and great will be the performance that carries each stage of this process to a successful conclusion. But it is not merely an individual that Soyinka has

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created, for, through this character come reverberations not only of earlier Soyinkan creations but also the great figures of Yoruba mythology. D. S. Izevbaye has pointed out the significance of Esu Elegba in this context: Esu Elegba whom he describes as "the principle of uncertainty, fertility and change, the one god who makes possible the reconciliation of opposites." Izevbaye has also pointed out the "Ogun-like courage of Elesin in the climactic Third Act."[4] Besides these there is another suggestive resonance in this character, Oranyan. Oranyan, son of the great progenitor of the Yoruba who had as one responsibility the defence of his people. This defence Oranyan undertook single-handed while the people stood by, like a Greek chorus, forbidden to intervene. Elesin Oba, on behalf of his people, also single-handed, had to join the dead king to prevent the destruction of his people. The other characters do not intervene, even at the iconoclastic intervention of Pilkings.

Thus Elesin Oba is an embodiment of the mythology and the history of his people and a performance of the play is, as Osofisan suggests, "the ritual itself."[5] The play is a celebration of Yoruba culture and is to be enacted through an "evocation of music from the abyss of transition" (Soyinka's note on the play). In this respect it accords with the distinction Soyinka makes between western drama and African drama in *Myth, Literature and the African World*.

> The serious divergences between a traditional African approach to drama and the European will not be found in lines of opposition between creative individualism and communal creativity, nor in the level of noise from the auditorium—this being the supposed gauge of audience participation—at any given performance. They will be found more accurately in what is a recognisable Western cast of mind, a compartmentalising habit of thought which periodically selects aspects of human emotion, phenomenal observations, metaphysical intuitions and even scientific deductions and turns them into separatist myths (or 'truths') sustained by a proliferating superstructure of presentation idioms, analogies and analytical modes . . . the difference which we are seeking to define between European and African drama as one of man's formal representation of experience is not simply a difference of style or form, nor is it confined to drama alone. It is representative of the essential difference between two world views, a difference between one culture whose very artifacts are evidence of a cohesive understanding of irreducible truths and

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> another, whose creative impulses are directed by period dialectics.[6]

Death and the King's Horseman is not a literary enactment of some significant but past moment, of some unique historical event or personality, but, in the words of the Christian church, a sacramental activity. Yet, Elesin Oba fails. Is the play therefore a sacrament of failure, a celebration of the impotence of tradition, a Yoruba version of Frederich Nietzsche's "God is Dead"?

Were one to study the play as a classic five-act construction, such a conclusion as that suggested might be reached since Elesin Oba is the "protagonist" and he fails. If, however, one observes the structure to be that of two converging movements, such a reading is impossible. The main thrust of the first movement has been pointed out above. The second movement begins in Act Two in the house of the District Officer, Simon Pilkings. This house and the Residency in Act Four represent a sterile, existential wasteland. Pilkings and his wife have no religious awe themselves and deride such awe whenever they are confronted by it, dismissing it as "mumbo-jumbo" and "nonsense." Jane Pilkings observes, with a tellingly condescending contradiction, "I think you've shocked his big pagan heart *bless him*" (p. 24) (my emphasis). Who or what is to confer blessings from their cosmological vacuum? Neither she nor her husband respect Egungun, Islam, Christianity, or traditional wisdom, yet Jane can pronounce to Olunde later in the play that "life should never be thrown deliberately away" (p. 51). If there is no respect for death there can be no respect for life. It is in this essentially pagan environment that the second movement of the play begins.

In Act Two, besides the Pilkings, Soyinka introduces three characters although one of them, Olunde, is only announced and does not appear until Act Four. The other two, Sergeant Amusa and Joseph, demonstrate differing, yet related, responses to the colonial experience, which is depicted in this play more in terms of its spiritual than its physical or political significance. Both Amusa and Joseph have been spiritually colonized. Both have taken alien religions and both have, by virtue of those religions, been cut off from their cultural roots. Sergeant Amusa is an emasculated figure of mockery who is routed by the market women while pursuing his confused idea of duty, although he does, ultimately, resist the crude bullying of Pilkings. Joseph manages to retain a chilling dignity in his confrontation with Pilkings, but his victory over the D.O. is ultimately hollow since it is clear he has

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no place outside the enervated missionary circles of the Very Reverend Macfarlane, as is evidenced by his ignorance of what is taking place in the market. Ignorance of events in the market is ignorance of the real world since "Oja L'aiye, Orun n'ile" [The world is a market, heaven is home]. Thus it would appear from the examples of Joseph and Amusa that entanglement with "the ghostly ones" and their ways, more importantly, a separation from the traditional values and beliefs of the culture, leads to an alienated deracination. Act Two also leads us to believe that Elesin Oba's son has deserted his home, its responsibilities, and its values. Olunde is described as a sensitive young man who "should be munching rose petals in Bloomsbury" but whose mind is set on being a doctor and who is actively trying to maintain contact with his father's great enemy, Pilkings. Olunde, with the assistance of Pilkings, "escaped" from the "close confinement" imposed by his father and ran away to England. Given the picture of Amusa and Joseph, one's expectation is for a newer model of Soyinka's earlier Frankenstein monstrosity, Lakunle.

In Act Four Olunde appears, having heard of the death of the King and wishing to pay his respects to his father whom he expects to find dead. Rather than a man whose roots have been pulled up and despite his "sober western suit," Olunde turns out to be a man whose experience of the world outside has brought a deeper understanding of his heritage and his relation to it. Soyinka is careful not to press the implications of that understanding too early in the play (p. 54):

> *Jane*: . . . and to tell the truth, only this evening, Simon and I agreed that we never really knew what you left with.
> *Olunde*: Neither did I. But I found out over there. I am grateful to your country for that. And I will never give it up.

In good time Soyinka will reveal the depth of Olunde's conviction. In Olunde's cosmology it is crucial that Elesin Oba dies to join the dead king so the world should not, in the words of Praise Singer, "be wrenched from its true course" or smashed "on the boulders of the great void." When Elesin Oba fails, Olunde undertakes the task of trying to avoid the catastrophe. When, in Act Five, Olunde's body is carried onto the stage the two converging movements of the play meet and through this meeting the affirmation of the play occurs. One movement began in the market place, the world, and led to Elesin Oba's realization of the cause of his failure (p. 69):

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> My will was squelched in the spittle of an alien race, and all because I had committed this blasphemy of thought—that there might be the hand of the gods in a stranger's intervention.

The other movement began in the cultural rag-and-bone shop of the colonial bungalow and developed through to Olunde's death. That death is a significant and uncompromising affirmation of traditional cosmology and a significant and uncompromising indictment of a generation of leaders who have betrayed both it and their trust.

I have suggested that *Death and the King's Horseman* was Soyinka's judgement on the decade or so of Nigerian history up to the time of its composition, more especially of that period in the aftermath of the civil war. In *The Man Died* (a richly suggestive title in the context of *Death and the King's Horseman*) Soyinka writes (p. 181):

> A war of solidity; for solidity is a far more accurate word than unity to employ in describing a war which can only consolidate the very values that gave rise to the war in the first place, for nowhere and at no time have those values been examined. Nowhere has there appeared a programme designed to ensure the eradication of the fundamental iniquities which gave rise to the initial conflicts.
>
> There will be victors of course, but not the sacrificing masses of Biafra or the rest of the nation. Being glutted and satiated with the expected bonus of war, the élitist pyramid will elide in the natural mechanism of satiation, the fart, will suck in new élitist sectors, creating a self-consolidating regurgitive, lumpen Mafiadom of the military, the old politicians and business enterprise. After all, a people's combative will is not limitless. The war will have put it to such an intolerable strain that little of it will be left over to challenge the war (power) profiteers when they begin to ride the nation to death. As they will, puffed with the wind of victory, incontestable rulers, the only beneficiaries of the stench of death.

It is one of the triumphs of *Death and the King's Horseman* that it avoids the pitfalls inherent in the tone of Soyinka's bitter prognostication in *The Man Died*. In the play he has avoided splenetic

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rage, rather transforming it into a compassionate masterpiece. His mood in *The Man Died* is almost uniformly destructive while *Death and the King's Horseman* is effectively constructive. Using Elesin Oba Soyinka has cast in human and humane form the "élitist pyramid [that] will elide in the natural mechanism of satiation." Elesin Oba is victim of his own strengths that are, as is so often the case with the great Prometheans whose cause European tragedy espouses, the cause of his weakness. Soyinka has made Elesin's failure both individual and representative since, as well as being a finely delineated individual character, Elesin Oba is also, as was suggested earlier, the embodiment of the culture of his people and as such he has an awful responsibility. It is quite simply that on him depends the future, on him depends existence itself. Within the cosmology of this play there is no distinction between the future in this incarnation and that of the ancestors. In this context it is worth noting the significance of placing a play of immediate, contemporary relevance in 1946. The implication of the contiguity of past, present, and future is that in any ultimate, essential sense, there is not past, present, or future, only a now, so that failure is eternal, irrevocable, total destruction in which the ancestors are destroyed along with everything else. The world of the ancestors cannot exist independently of this world nor this world independently of them. A failure now is as final as in 1946, 1846, or 2046. It is for this reason that Iyaloja, mother of the market, mother of the world, allows Elesin Oba no pity when she confronts him in prison (p. 68):

> You have betrayed us. We fed you sweetmeats such as we hoped awaited you on the other side. But you said No, I must eat the world's left-overs. We said you were the hunter who brought the quarry down; to you belonged the vital portions of the game. No, you said, I am the hunter's dog and I shall eat the entrails of the game and the faeces of the hunter. We said you were the hunter returning home in triumph, a slain buffalo pressing down on his neck; you said wait, I first must turn up this cricket hole with my toes. We said yours was the doorway at which we first spy the tapper when he comes down from the tree, yours was the blessing of the twilight wine, the purl that brings night spirits out of doors to steal their portion before the light of day. We said yours was the body of wine whose burden shakes the tapper like a sudden gust on his perch. You said, No, I am content to lick the dregs from each calabash when the drinkers are done. We

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> said, the dew on the earth's surface was for you to wash your feet along the slopes of honour. You said No, I shall step in the vomit of cats and the droppings of mice; I shall fight them for the left-overs of the world.

This is a sprawling, searching, evocative speech, as potent in powerful allusions as a brimful keg of palm wine. Through its immediate and direct condemnation of Elesin Oba comes a more far-reaching condemnation of a leadership addicted to leftovers. As with all finely wrought images this one allows the mind ample space to travel from the particular to the general. As the speech proceeds, before the mind's eye passes a sordid picture of devastation and waste: the history of a continent of proud people and magnificent creatures, but the creatures have been destroyed to make feather fans for the chorus girls of Las Vegas, handbags for Mayfair, coats for Paris, aphrodisiacs for Tokyo, while the proud people are reduced to porters or to dependence on Red Cross handouts, erased like the Amerindian or the Aborigine at the instigation of a stranger's intervening economy. Where palm wine and millet beer were suitable refreshment in the past, now only champagne and scotch whisky will do for a man and Babycham for a lady. "Junk food" is ubiquitous. From Coca-Cola to corn flakes the picture is the same as people are

> pressured into dietary tastes and habits whose high cost is related less to nutritive value than to the promotion, packaging and profits of foreign brand owners.[7]

It is not accidental that such dietary changes occur as the result of marketing policy. Susan George quotes the board chairman of International Flavours and Fragrances advising others on how to market their products successfully (p. 169, emphasis added):

> How often we see in developing countries that the poorer the economic outlook, the more important the small luxury of a flavoured soft drink or smoke . . . to the dismay of many would-be benefactors, the poorer the malnourished are, the more likely they are to spend a disproportionate amount of whatever they have on some luxury rather than on what they need. . . . Observe, study, learn [how to sell in rapidly changing rural societies]. *We try to do it at IFF. It seems to pay off for us. Perhaps it will for you too.*[8]

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And vultures worry at the piles of imported tin cans that result from this callous indifference. Businessmen from Europe compete with each other for franchises to import food banned in Europe or America. International drug consortia peddle dangerous drugs with criminal irresponsibility knowing they will be distributed by unqualified pharmacists unable to read the instructions written in the minutest of print. Y. B. Usman had this to say on the subject in 1977 (p. 61):

> The peasant in Funtua, Gboko, and Umuahia does not only fail to benefit in any way from this purchase of shares [in transnational companies] by his "countrymen" but actually loses in three major ways. In the first place, these companies and their agencies are more effectively exploiting him through lower prices (and wages paid to his son in the factory), hoarding, shoddier goods, since they have richer and more powerful "indigenes" working directly for them. Secondly, these companies are more effectively manipulating and milking the peasant by looting the public wealth through tax evasion, foreign exchange rackets, contracts and purchases, because the public institutions are run by people who are their shareholders. Thirdly, the peasant is ultimately divested of his farm because the indigenous shareholder has made so much profit through dividends and hoarding and inflation that he puts him into debt, buys off his farm, creates a large estate (actually a private holiday resort) and makes him both landless and unemployed. That is why when they were squabbling over these shares we asked who made up this "North" likely to benefit from these shares of the "West"; and who made up "the nation" that is supposed to benefit from this "indigenisation". That is why we asked why these companies which were productive were not taken over by public institutions at federal, state, local government levels and by trade union, co-operatives and other collective institutions. Those companies which were not producing anything useful like those importing cosmetics, trinkets and drinks should just be closed down. You can see why the question of whose nation is quite fundamental.

It is not unreasonable to claim that the imaginative scope of Iyaloja's speech of condemnation encompasses all of these visions and more.

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At the end of the speech that raises such a ghastly spectre Iyaloja says, "We called you leader and oh, how you led us on" (p. 68). Soon after this assault by Iyaloja comes Elesin Oba's admission of the cause of his failure. From the time of his incarceration he began to probe for the reasons of his failure (p. 62):

> in the house of *osugbo*, those who keep watch through the spirit recognised the moment, they sent word to me through the voice of our sacred drums to prepare myself. I heard them and I shed all thoughts of earth. I began to follow the moon to the abode of gods . . . servant of the white king, that was when you entered my chosen place of departure on feet of desecration.

This is the initial excuse of a broken man who is trying to find a scapegoat. It is, at bottom, the culture-conflict excuse, a rationalization employed to excuse a setting loose of the responsibilities implied by his culture and his place in it, just another in the train of feeble rationalizations in the process of the accumulation of leftovers. At the nadir of his spiritual fortunes Elesin Oba uses the culture-conflict excuse, but Olunde demonstrates that those who whine of culture conflict employ Eurocentric formulae with no substance. It is no accident that Soyinka wants to avoid the simplistic interpretation of *Death and the King's Horseman* being "about" culture conflict.

Somewhat later in Act Five, alone with his weeping, faithful young bride, Elesin Oba is compelled to a more truthful analysis (p. 65):

> First I blamed the white man, then I blamed my gods for deserting me. Now I feel I want to blame you for the mystery of the sapping of my will. But blame is a strange peace offering for a man to bring a world he has deeply wronged, and to its innocent dwellers. Oh little mother, I have taken countless women in my life but you were more than a desire of the flesh. I needed you as the abyss across which my body must be drawn, I filled it with earth and dropped my seed in it at the moment of preparedness for my crossing. You were the final gift of the living to their emissary to the land of the ancestors, and perhaps your warmth and youth brought new insights of this world to me and turned my feet leaden on this side of the abyss. For I confess to you, daughter, my weakness came not merely from the abomination of the

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> 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.

But it is the mother of the world, Iyaloja, who forces from him the awful truth. It is her catalog, discussed above, of his failure as a leader that compels him to acknowledge how he came to fail in his duty. He realizes that (p. 69)

> it is when the alien hand pollutes the source of will, when a stranger force of violence shatters the mind's calm resolution, this is when a man is made to commit the awful treachery of relief, commit in his thought the unspeakable blasphemy of seeing the hand of the gods in this alien rupture of his world. I know it was this thought that killed me, sapped my powers and turned me into an infant in the hands of unnamable strangers.

In the production of the play at Bayero University in Kano in 1979, Nelson Okonkwo playing Elesin Oba spat the words "unnamable strangers" into the ear of one of the policeman detailed by Pilkings to guard him. It was a gesture of defiance but it was also a gesture of self-repudiation since he had become as much a lackey of the colonial presence as that representative of the "native administration." This gesture is followed by his dreadful confession (p. 69):

> My will was squelched in the spittle of an alien race, and all because I had committed this blasphemy of thought–that there might be the hand of the gods in a stranger's intervention.

Thus the cause of Elesin Oba's failure is, ultimately, blasphemy, which is to say, betrayal. Unable to withstand the attraction of a life of addiction to leftovers he tried to convince himself that the leftovers were wholesome, that the neglect of his historically enshrined, sacred duty to the dead and the living was legitimate. If this neglect of duty could be explained as the will of the gods, then infraction of that duty could be seen as fulfilment and his inability to "commit death" would be meritorious. The greatest and deepest betrayal, the archetypal betrayal, is that that claims to be an honoring of the contract with those being betrayed. It is an act

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that precludes respect for its proponent. As a leader of his people at a particular time in their history Elesin Oba had a particular responsibility to them: to withstand the adulteration of the life-sustaining essence of the society. Instead he rationalized and was fatally compromised.

When Elesin Oba asks that the world forgive him, we come to the crux of the play. Elesin who has brought laughter and tears, who has earned respect and for whom nothing but good has been desired, this man has now to be cast off and rejected. The pathos of the situation asks that he be forgiven but sentimentality has to be renounced. The integrity of the play demands it, but, more significantly, the integrity of the society requires it. Elesin Oba is a dramatic creation with the mythic proportions of the great figures of literature. He has the grandeur, dignity, and pathos of Oedipus; the questing anguish of Hamlet; the restless and aspiring soul of Peer Gynt; the arrogance of Nietzsche's superman; the sense of comedy, love of life, and sensual proclivities of Dionysus; and the pathetic, rationalizing weakness of Richard II. Though a creation of such stature he has to be totally and unequivocally renounced: "I have no father, eater of left-overs" (p. 61).

In the final analysis, however, the renunciation of Elesin Oba is not undertaken in a spirit of disdain or contempt, rather as a kind of scorification. Elesin Oba may have failed as a leader but he is still a man and his body deserves the respect accorded to the bodies of men, "However sunk he was in debt he is no pauper's carrion abandoned on the road" (p. 76). He is dramatically central to this play and in a performance cannot but dominate the proceedings. Yet, as with those leaders on the actual "world stage" whom he represents and who also dominate the proceedings and often wrench the world from its true course and plunge it into chaos, if the integrity of the people is to be maintained both Elesin Oba and the leaders have to be finally, but humanely, renounced. "Forget the dead," Iyaloja commands, "forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn" (p. 76) who are, in Ayi Kwei Armah's words, "The Beautyful Ones."

It might appear from the foregoing that Soyinka could be accused of espousing a form of romantic primitivism. The opposite is the case. Olunde is the character who embodies the play's contemporary and significant affirmation and he is neither primitive nor romantic. He is the character we might expect to embrace the "sophisticated" leftovers of an alien culture much as do Dr. Faseyi in *The Interpreters* or Brempong in Armah's *Fragments*. Olunde shows that once the essence of the culture is fully embraced then

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exposure to glittering eye-catching dross has no effect. There will be snapping of fingers around the head but no abandoning of hard-won harvests or rapid dialog with the legs. With the death of Olunde and the joining of the two movements of the play, not only have the roles of father and son been reversed, but also Elesin Oba has changed roles with Joseph and Amusa. They both salvage some dignity from their plight; he salvages nothing. Elesin (p. 76)

> is gone at last into the passage but oh, how late it is. His son will feast on the meat and throw him bones. The passage is clogged with droppings from the King's stallion; he will arrive all stained in dung.

The wallowers in the detritus of an alien culture in this world wallow in the dung for eternity. Olunde who went to Europe with an ambivalent mind learned what is fundamental to his integrity and to the integrity of his people: the contiguity of past, present, and future. Those who betray the present destroy not just themselves but the entire community—forever.

The difficulty confronting anybody attempting to follow Olunde's "model" of procedure is that it is vague and prescribes no formula for the potential acolyte. No doubt Yakubu Nasidi would see this vagueness as "indicative of the incoherence of the playwright's political intuition."[9] It is, perhaps, more useful to regard Soyinka as giving instructions similar to those of another intellectual giant of contemporary Nigeria, Yusufu Bala Usman who in 1975 instructed graduates thus (p. 40):

> A direct, honest and frank question defines a problem, and if there is the will to tackle it, that is half-way to its solution. One might even say that the most fundamental problem of contemporary Nigeria is the way we ask questions.

It is significant that both Usman and Soyinka direct their followers towards questioning. In ideological terms they are poles apart, as indeed were Marx and Shakespeare—that did not prevent Marx from using Shakespeare to shed light on his ideas. Soyinka's prescription is for individuals to undertake a vigorous journey of self-discovery with no route indicating how obstacles may be negotiated, guaranteeing only that it will demand great, perhaps the ultimate, self-sacrifice. It is a route familiar to Soyinka himself so it is propounded with some authority. Few people, however, have

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the moral and spiritual stature for such a challenge while for the majority even the idea of it is a luxury. How shall a truck pusher, a lorry-park tout or a market woman find time for such an activity? Since the play does not speak directly to the common man it might be rejected by those with that particular ideological prescription for art. It is, after all, the Marxian critic might justifiably object, merely bourgeois entertainment whose silent ideology is to reduce the masses to political irrelevance. "In this play," Izevbaye writes in an article already referred to, "Soyinka stresses the importance of honor for the well-being of man by pointing out the need for the transcendence of material goals" (p. 124). As this comment assumes, the play centers on the upper echelons of a hierarchical society; Olunde's example is for the leaders in that society and the play is about such leaders. Soyinka has renounced "inert historical scarecrows" and "ideological dragons" and writes of the world as he understands it, not as others do. The play is unashamedly hierarchical, as is the society that is depicted. Soyinka is a leader in that society. In his own right he stands on the pinnacle of his achievement thundering his condemnation of those leaders who betray their calling and their trust, dragging the people into "dung and vomit . . . lips reeking of the left-overs of lesser men." From another pinnacle, sometimes cynically dubbed an ivory tower, that other giant—Usman—also thunders (p. 56, emphasis added)

> transnationals . . . are owned, controlled and geared to operate in order to suck wealth from the Third World to Western Europe, America and Japan. This is made possible not because of any technological superiority, but because the classes in the Third World countries like Nigeria are essentially intermediaries, or, if you like, trading-post agents and *lack the will, capacity and political base with which to break their strangleholds.*

Soyinka's Praise Singer—guardian of culture, custodian of history and chider of misdemeanor—laments of the failure of his erstwhile leader (p. 75):

> Elesin, we placed the reins of the world in your hands yet you watched it plunge over the edge of the bitter precipice. You sat with folded arms while evil strangers tilted the world from its course and crashed it beyond the edge of emptiness —you muttered, there is little that one man can do, you left

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us floundering in a blind future. Your heir has taken the burden on himself.

NOTES

1. Y. B. Usman, "The Manipulation of Religion in Nigeria Today: Its Social and Political Basis," *For the Liberation of Nigeria* (London: New Beacon Books, 1979), p. 89. All further references to Usman are from this edition.

2. Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* (London: Methuen, 1975), p. 19. All further references are to this edition.

3. Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975). All further references are to this edition.

4. D. S. Izevbaye, "Mediation in Soyinka: The Case of the King's Horseman," in *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka*, ed. James Gibbs (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1981), pp. 116 and 118.

5. Femi Osofisan, "Tiger on Stage: Wole Soyinka and the Nigerian Theatre," *Theatre in Africa,* ed. Oyin Ogunba and Abiola Irele (Ibaden: University of Ibadan Press, 1978), p. 166.

6. Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 37-38.

7. Susan George, *How the Other Half Dies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 170.

8. Ibid. p. 169.

9. Yakubu Nasidi, "Literature and Politics: 'Kongi's Harvest' as Political Drama," *Work in Progress* [Zaria], No. 3 (1980), 32.

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