

Language as a means of transmitting culture in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*

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ABSTRACT: *Apart from material aspect of culture which has to do with artefacts, namely, tools, clothing food, medicine, utensils and housing, language remains the most potent medium of expressing a people's culture. It has also been observed that there is a subtle correlation between language and thought, and a people's language is the profound witticism of the native tongue which finds natural outlet in hard-core proverbs and pithy anecdotes. This is what informed this paper which examines Soyinka's imaginative use of Yoruba Language in the dramatization of a ritual.*

Introduction.

Culture is the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenge of living in their environment which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and modes of organisation thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours. (Nigerian Cultural Policy 1988:5)

Culture comprises materials, institutional, philosophical and creative aspects. The material aspect has to do with artefacts in its broadest form namely: tools, clothing, food, medicine, utensils and housing). The institutional deals with the political, economic, social and legal structures created to help achieve material and spiritual objectives; while the philosophical is concerned with ideas, beliefs and values; the creative concerns a people's literature (oral or written) as well as visual and performing arts which normally would as other aspects of culture.

Language on the other hand is human speech, either spoken or written. Language is the most common system of communication. It allows people to talk to each other and write their thoughts and ideas. The word language may be loosely used to mean any system of communication, such as traffic lights and Indian smoke signals. But the origin of the word shows its basic use. It comes from the Latin word *Lingua* meaning tongue. And a language still is often called a tongue. (World Book of Encyclopaedia, Volume 12).

Subsequently, wherever there is human society, there is language. A common language enables human beings to work together in an infinite variety of ways. Language has made possible development of advanced technological civilization. Without language for

communication, there would be little or no science, religion, commerce, government, art, literature and philosophy.

What can be deduced from these basic definitions is the reciprocative relationship between language and culture. This interdependence of language and culture is more discernible in the creative and philosophical aspects of culture, which are concerned with ideas, beliefs, values, literature, visual and performing arts.

In the performing arts which is the focus of this paper, projections of the philosophical and creative aspects manifest in speeches and songs. In our day to day interaction and in dramatic texts and performances, personality, ideas values, beliefs and sense of wisdom are unfolded in speeches laced with proverbs and imageries. Norms and values of a society are equally better captured in musical compositions and thematic songs of a dramatic piece. This explains why some musical compositions of the yester years in the Yoruba musical genres of *Apala*, *Sakara*, *Fuji* and *Juju* remain evergreen in terms of edification on norms and values.

It is also important to note that, be it in a native language or English translation, the culture of a people is better transmitted through language because of the witticism in the construct in terms of proverbs and imagery which are from the social reality of the culture. Matthew Umukoro (122) corroborates this fact, with this submission that;

There is a subtle correlation between language and thought, and a people's language is inextricably bound up with the way they think and feel. One of the hardest things to translate into a foreign language is the profound witticism of the native tongue, which finds natural outlet in hard-core proverbs and pithy anecdotes.

This same logic informs the advocacy of the use of indigenous language in creative writings for comprehension and impact. However, the examples of the likes of D. O. Fagunwa have shown that audience of native writers are normally restricted to their literary universe as Fagunwa is hardly accessible outside Yoruba speaking group with whom he directly communicates. In a similar vein, the experiment of Ngugi Wa' Thiong'o to get to the grassroots with native language was not all that successful.

To avoid this controversy, and for universal appeal in the transmission of culture, reconstruction of native language without the lost of the native flavour in rendition like Soyinka does in *Death and the King's Horseman* remains the best option.

Death and the King's horseman: Historical Source.

On Tuesday 19th December. 1944. the Alaafin of Oyo. Oba Siyanbola Oladigbolu I, died after a reign of thirty-three years. The

commander of the King's stables, *Olokun Esin* Jinadu, had enjoyed a privileged position during Alaafin's reign and it seems to have been assumed by the people of Oyo that he would 'follow his master' by committing ritual, suicide. On 19th December, Jinadu delivered a message at the village of Ikoyi near Oyo.

About three weeks later, on January 4th, 1945, he returned to Oyo, dressed himself in white and began dancing through the streets towards the house of Bashorun Ladokun, a customary prelude to committing suicide. It was apparently anticipated that he would end his life by the established means of taking poison or allowing a relative to strangle him. However, at this point the British Colonial Officer in authority at Oyo intervened; he sent an order to the Basorun's house that Jinadu should be apprehended and taken to the residency. This order was carried out and Jinadu was taken into custody. When word of the arrest spread, Jinadu's youngest son, Murana, sacrificed himself in his father's place.

Yoruba Cosmology

Based on this historical source with minor amendments, in matters of detail and, of course, characterization, Soyinka dramatizes the ritual of supreme sacrifice, relying more on language and characterization spiced with songs, dances and drumming to depict the Yoruba metaphysical world.

If the *The Lion and the Jewel*, *Kongi's Harvest*, *The Swamp Dwellers*, *A Dance of the Forests* and *The Strong Breed* present the Yoruba, nay African culture on the physical plane, in *Death and the King's Horseman*, there is an in-depth exploration of culture on the metaphysical plane. Therefore to fully appreciate the cultural aesthetics in this historical play, it is necessary to give insight into Yoruba cosmology.

The Yoruba concept of the universe recognizes three distinct but interrelated "worlds". These are the world of the unborn, the world of the living, and the ancestral world. In relation to "transition", Soyinka explains

[t]he past is the ancestors: the present belongs to the living and the future to the unborn. The duties stand in the same situation to the living as do the ancestors and the unborn, obeying same laws, suffering same agonies and uncertainties, employing the same Masonic intelligence of rituals for the perilous plunge into the fourth area of experience, the immeasurable gulf of transition. (148)

Everyman, it is believed, must pass through this numinous cycle in his complex journey of being; the unborn leaves its abode to be conceived by the living (the woman), it is born into the world of the

living where it joins the ancestors in the ancestral world at death. As death, the ascent of the spirit of the departed is made possible only when his spirit is liberated through shedding of blood (Osofisan:1978: 151 175). That is, there is an induced metaphysical liberation when a life animal is sacrificed to course a '*numinous bride'over* which liberated spout must cross to the ancestral world.

In a similar vein, *Death and the King's Horseman* Elesin Oba is saddled with sacrificial role of committing ritual suicide to smoothen the transition of Alaafin to the ancestral world and the continuity of the physical and spiritual linkage of these worlds. Investigations revealed that, this time tested tradition still persists in ancient Oyo and other cultures in Nigeria but with subtle actualization because of modern civilization. In the theatricalisation of this ritual and to explore the Yoruba cosmic world of the unborn, the living and the dead, Soyinka relies heavily on language spiced with idioms and proverbs. When these characters; (Elesin- Oba, Iyaloja and Praise Singer) speak, the playwright thinks in Yoruba but writes in English without the loss of the Yoruba flavour in rendition. In affirming this projection of culture with language; Biodun Jeyifo contends that;

In Death and the King's Horseman both Elesin Oba and other African characters of the play, excepting the native functionaries of the colonial machine, are made to express consciously and with lyrical force, the redemptive nature of Elesin-Oba's intended ritual suicide (32).

He (Jeyifo) goes further to stress that, in contrast to any other play of Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* is a presentation of realities with lyrical brilliance of dramatic language that compels acceptance. Another affirmation of this fact is the question asked by Simon Pilkings that; must your people forever speak in riddles? (71)

Language as a means of transmitting culture in Soyinka's *Death and the King's horseman*:

Like in his earlier plays, presentation of cultural characters in *Death and the King's Horseman* is enhanced through language. As custodians of culture in African community, Elesin-Oba, Praise-Singer and Iyaloja exhibit a high degree of competence and performance in the knowledge of powerful and very rich Yoruba idioms and expressions. In Yoruba traditional philosophy which is Soyinka's literary playground as Umukoro affirms that:

Proverbs are esteemed as the efficient search horses for ferreting out hidden meaning of enigmatic worlds and mysterious facts of life. (83)

By the same logic, characterization through language laced with proverbs, imagery and symbols unravel the hidden facts about the Yoruba world view of the Unborn, the living, the dead and the ritual sacrifice for unimpeded transition from one of these worlds to another. The Cosmic significance of Elesin's response to the call for which is whole life has been a preparation, and on which the future of his people depends is captured in the praise-singer's chant:

There is only one home to the life of a river mussel; there is only one home to the life of a tortoise; there is only one shell to the soul of man; there is only one world to the spirit of our race. If that world leaves its course and smashes on boulders of great void, whose world will give us Shelter? (11).

When Elesin's delay tactics in committing the ritual suicide lead to his arrest, Iyaloja is as unsparing of this betrayal as she is generous and accommodating when she thinks the Elesin deserves indulgence. She voices out the societal resentment with in poetic language:

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 belong the vital portions of the game. No, you said, I am 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 (68).

This is an obvious indictment of Elesin's subversion of the spirit for the flesh which could have been devastating for the society if not for the timely intervention of Olunde. In language, 'the song of the Not 1 bird is a poetic language meant to serve the traditional function of epic simile' (Dasylva 1996:23). It therefore symbolizes Elesin's fear and lack of courage to perform the duty which his sacred office imposes on him as he admits that;

I, when that Not 1 bird perched upon my roof, bade him seek his nest again, safe, without care or fear. I unrolled my welcome

*mat for him to see. Not I flew happily away, you hear his voice
No more in this life time. You all know what I am. (14).*

This, to Dasyuva implies that, “when the Not 1 Bird (i.e. fear) pays him a visit, he encourages the bird (fear) to make a nest there without fear or threat to its life” (30). Elesin therefore willingly allows fear occasioned by lust for vanity to becloud his sense of duty. Soyinka's recourse to symbolic use of Yoruba idiomatic expression is amplified in Iyaloja's scolding of Elesin Oba.

*How boldly the lizards struts before the pigeon when it was the
eagle itself he promised us he would confront (67)*

The powerful imagery to note, according to Dasyuva includes “Lizard”, a cold blooded reptile which symbolizes the cowardly but boastful Elesin; “Pigeon” symbolizing a relatively harmless and mortal Pilkins; and “the eagle” (a bird of prey and an agent of death), here symbolizing death (1996:42). In other words, Elesin's boldness before pilkins is a mere face saving device, having failed to confront death fearlessly.

Summary and Conclusion

In this paper, Soyinka's imaginative use of language to explore the Yoruba cosmic world of the unborn, the living and the dead has been examined. By employing the technique of exposition of characters through language, the ritual of supreme sacrifice is dramatized. The outcome is a celebration of Yoruba culture as typified in the idiomatic expressions of Elesin-Oba, Iyaloja and Praise-Singer. Through these characters, the playwright's sensibility to the poetic quality of Yoruba language is revealed. Even though written in English the Yoruba flavour is not lost.

We can, therefore, conclude that language is a potent medium of transmitting culture whether in a native tongue or in a translated form, this is because the ideas, beliefs and values of a culture are better expounded through language.

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