

**“Our World is Tumbling in the Void of Strangers”:
A Failed Ritual in Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the
King’s Horseman*.**

Inés Bigot



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/pla/1624>

DOI: 10.4000/130gk

ISSN: 3074-5136

Publisher

Société des Études Postcoloniales

Electronic reference

Inés Bigot, ““Our World is Tumbling in the Void of Strangers”: A Failed Ritual in Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*.”, *Postcolonial Literatures and Arts* [Online], 2.1 | 2024, Online since 30 December 2024, connection on 17 November 2025. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/pla/1624> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/130gk>

This text was automatically generated on November 17, 2025.



The text only may be used under licence CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) may be subject to specific use terms.

"Our World is Tumbling in the Void of Strangers": A Failed Ritual in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*.

Inés Bigot

- 1 In Wole Soyinka's 1975 play *Death and the King's Horseman*, the King's horseman, Elesin, fails to accomplish his choreographed ritual suicide after the King of Oyo's death. Not only is this ritual – which consists of a trance dance – interrupted by the “abomination of the white man” (Soyinka 2016, 71) embodied by Simon Pilkings, the British District Officer whose misunderstanding of the religious and ethical stakes of the Yoruba ritual leads him to interrupt it, thus contributing to the collapse of cosmological and social balance, but it is also endangered by the protagonist's own inner flaw as he vacillates at the crucial moment of transition which was supposed to take him to the world of the ancestors. Indeed, Elesin's attachment to the pleasures of the mortal world inevitably ties him to the earth and the fault line clearly lies in the divide between the horseman's hubristic will to accomplish brilliantly his religious mission and its failed outcome. The dance ritual is thus dysfunctional in several aspects: it is dysfunctional in the eyes of the British characters of the play who mistake it for ritual “murder,” (Soyinka 2016, 27) and decide to put an end to it, and it is dysfunctional because of its failure to maintain the expected cosmic balance of Elesin's community – a failure which triggers division among the characters and the rupture of the communication between the world of the ancestors and that of the living.
- 2 The play's focus on this failed and flawed dance ritual suggests a critical discourse around the possibilities of survival of traditional ethics in a modern, colonial and postcolonial context where epistemological, religious and cultural values have undergone considerable mutations. Indeed, it is my contention that in *Death and the King's Horseman*, as in several other plays by Soyinka such as *A Dance of the Forests* (1963), *The Road* (1965) or *Madmen and Specialists* (1971), the ritual format is not used just as a

cohesive and conciliatory dramaturgical aesthetics but also as a dissident critical tool that invites us to reflect on the conditions of the rebuilding of a communal Nigerian identity in the modern era. Such a point of view contrasts with a certain number of analyses of Soyinka's major plays that tend to adopt an unproblematized and univocal approach to ritual as a liberating theme and format (see for example Brockbank, David, Katrak, Larsen and Ogunba). I argue that it is precisely the divide, the fault line existing between Soyinka's two dramaturgical trajectories that opens up a new space for fruitful, liberating creativity and critical thinking when the opposed trajectories meet at "magical intervals," to use Soyinka's expression in the poem "Doctored Vision" (Soyinka 2002, 15).

- 3 Such a friction between two antagonistic theatrical trajectories implies a specific conception of theatre and ritual, two forms that are subtly interwoven but never completely fused in Soyinka's plays, and particularly in *Death and the King's Horseman*. In this play, the performative dimension of rituals – the term ritual being understood as the repetition of an efficacious action supposed to contribute to maintaining order, whether it be social or cosmic – meets the fictive dimension of theatre, the latter form never being limited to its entertaining qualities.¹ One of the key questions we must ask ourselves when facing Soyinka's ritualized plays is precisely that of the reinvention or re-staging of traditional rituals that the playwright adapts to a modern stage in the context of a mutation of traditions. Far from trying to turn his plays into a reproduction of sacred rituals, which would be bound to fail, Soyinka plays with the overlapping of, and sometimes clash between, theatrical and ritual forms. In so doing, he is taking some distance from the sacred rites he stages in his works.
- 4 This dual trajectory or creative fault line which consists in celebrating and at the same time questioning traditional rituals is what makes of Soyinka's dissident theatre a vehicle for change mediating his philosophical and political questioning. His plays act as an efficient critical laboratory that invites its audience to reflect on the cultural and socio-political conditions of a rebuilding of identity both in ontological and national terms. Dissidence characterizes the dramaturgical aesthetics of the plays and the ritual forms themselves which persist and resist, more or less successfully, and manifest a capacity to adapt and mutate as they face the threat of disappearance.
- 5 In order to examine the dissident critical potential of the ritual staged in *Death and the King's Horseman*, I will first analyze the structure of the play – based on an alternation of Nigerian scenes and scenes focusing on members of the British colonial establishment – so as to show how Soyinka subtly interrupts the ritual flow of the action. This strategy of interruption makes it difficult for the audience to experience the play as a cohesive communal rite. Instead, we are invited to reflect on the precarious survival of a traditional ritual such as Elesin's in a modern context. I will then focus on the staging of the central dance ritual itself: not only does Soyinka relegate the peak of Elesin's trance dance to an invisible off-stage but he also chooses to represent Elesin's son's own unnatural ritual suicide off-stage. This brings to the fore the inefficiency of the dysfunctional ritual in a colonial context where it seems doomed to disappear. I will conclude this second part on an analysis of Elesin's flawed dance in Jide Ogunbade's 1994 staging of *Death and the King's Horseman* at the National Theatre in Lagos (Nigeria), which sheds light on the cosmic and social stakes at work in this ritual. I will show that the dysfunctional dance itself amounts to an experience of great instability and loss of

landmarks in Ogunbade's staging of the play, even more so than in Soyinka's original published version, where the negative outcome of the ritual seems less predictable.

A dramaturgical strategy of interruption: the alternating structure of the play

- 6 According to Biodun Jeyifo in *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism* (2004), contrary to other plays by Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*, tends to "fuse and harmonize ritual and drama by integrating the words, actions and gestures of Elesin Oba as the communicant of the communal rite and as existential hero of the private drama of his vacillating, subliminally divided will" (2004, 106). Even though Jeyifo is aware of the critical distance that Soyinka is taking when he incorporates rituals into this play and others, his words have to be qualified and questioned. A detailed analysis of the structure of *Death and the King's Horseman* will enable me to show how Soyinka creates a subtle mechanism of interruption of the ritual thread in the play and to think about the reasons for and consequences of such a strategy of internal sabotage.
- 7 The collective ritual which lies at the core of *Death and the King's Horseman* – a ritual dance that will be interrupted – is a form of suicide which Elesin has to "perform," following the Yoruba tradition, so as to accompany the *Alafin* (the King of Oyo who died a month earlier) on his transitional way to the world of the ancestors. The note following the list of characters suggests that the play has been conceived as an intense ritualized experience: "The play should run without an interval. For rapid scene changes, one adjustable outline set is very appropriate" (Soyinka 2016, 5). This stage direction indicates that the rhythm of the drama has to be sustained, most likely to avoid breaking the thread that inevitably leads us to Elesin's ritual dance at the end of scene 3, and then to Olunde's final ritual – since Elesin's son decides to replace his father when he learns that he has failed to fulfill his duty. Soyinka himself insists on the fact that *Death and the King's Horseman* should not be reduced to a mere ideological confrontation between the Yoruba community and members of the British colonial administration, underlining the metaphysical dimension of the action. He thus encourages potential stage directors of the play to capture its "threnodic essence" and puts forward the key notion of transition:

I find it necessary to caution the would-be producer of this play against a sadly familiar reductionist tendency, and to direct his vision instead to the far more difficult and risky task of eliciting the play's threnodic essence [...]. The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind – the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links all: transition. *Death and the King's Horseman* can be fully realised only through an evocation of music from the abyss of transition. (Soyinka 2016, 3–4, "Author's note")
- 8 It is precisely into the "abyss of transition" – the notion of transition being central to the understanding of Soyinka's dramatic and theoretical works – that Elesin has to plunge in order to keep the balance between the various spheres of the Yoruba community, making contact with the world of the dead through his danced suicide. In his essay entitled "The Fourth Stage," the playwright defines the space of transition as follows: "the chthonic realm, the seething cauldron of the dark world will and psyche, the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and becoming" (Soyinka 2005, 142). According to the Yoruba world-view, this transitional space completes the trio

constituted by the world of the Ancestor, the world of the Living and the world of the Unborn as Soyinka explains in *Of Africa* (Soyinka 2012, 157). It is invested with a liminal dimension as it bridges opposite spaces and enables the communicant to contribute to the renewal of the energies of the whole community.

- 9 Despite Soyinka's insistence on the "universe of the Yoruba mind" in the preceding quote, the alternation between Nigerian scenes and scenes that are focused on the representatives of British colonial authority, who despise Yoruba beliefs, tends to disrupt the ritual continuity of the story. As we shall see, the British characters do not understand the major stakes at work in Elesin's rite of passage – a rite that is supposed to maintain the social and cosmic balance. The first scene brings us to a Yoruba market that is about to close, which can be interpreted as a symbolical foreshadowing of the King's horseman's approaching death. Here are the stage directions: "A passage through a market in its closing stages. The stalls are being emptied, mats folded. A few women pass through on their way home, loaded with baskets" (Soyinka 2016, 7). The scene is characterized by Elesin's joyful and proud singing and dancing as he prepares to face the transitional abyss: "Elesin Oba enters along a passage before the market, pursued by his drummers and praise-singers. He is a man of enormous vitality, speaks, dances and sings with that infectious enjoyment of life which accompanies all his actions" (7). It is precisely this "enormous vitality" and "enjoyment of life" that will be the cause of Elesin's failure later on. At this point however, he seems to be sure of himself and of the successful outcome of the ritual. When the Praise-Singer reminds him of the importance of his trance dance, telling him that their "world was never wrenched from its true course" before (Soyinka 2016, 8), the horseman asserts that the future of his community will be as stable as its past was, hubristically refusing to envisage the possibility of a breach in the supposedly well-oiled ritual suicide – a breach that would contribute to the collapse of the world: "It did not in the time of my forebears, it shall not in mine" (9).
- 10 This first scene is followed by another scene where the British couple formed by Simon and Jane Pilkings inappropriately comment on the upcoming ritual, which contributes to demystify it even before it has taken place. The following short extract is eloquent enough when it comes to this aspect. The Pilkingses are exchanging with Joseph, their houseboy, who is a Christian convert:

Pilkings: ... Now Joseph, answer me on the honour of a Christian – what is supposed to be going on in town tonight?

Joseph: Tonight sir? You mean the chief who is going to kill himself?

Pilkings: What?

Jane: What do you mean, kill himself?

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

Joseph: No master. He will not kill anybody and no one will kill him. He will simply die. (28–29)

The British couple cannot grasp this notion of a native ritual suicide, which they wrongly interpret as "ritual murder" earlier (27). Their state of shock is put forward by the repetition of the verb "kill" and the multiplication of questions which invade the dialogue and make it stutter. The couple's frightened behaviour strongly contrasts with Joseph's passive acceptance of the ritual suicide as a necessity, the inevitable dimension of Elesin's act being emphasized by the repetition of "will" in the last sentence in the quote. The couple's inability to understand traditional Yoruba culture and their futile

attachment to the ball they are going to attend at the Residency further emphasize the gap separating their ethos from that of the Yoruba characters in the play.

- 11 Scene 2 is framed by the British couple's ludicrous preparation for their artificial tango dance in traditional Yoruba costumes, which is in total contrast with Elesin's trance dance in scene 3. The stage directions at the beginning and at the end of scene 2 show the couple's superficial preoccupations:

The verandah of the District Officer's Bungalow. A tango is playing from an old hand-cranked gramophone and, glimpsed through the wide windows and doors which open onto the forestage verandah, are the shapes of Simon Pilkings and his wife, Jane, tangoing in and out of shadows in the living-room. There are wearing what is immediately apparent as some form of fancy dress. (Soyinka 2016, 24)

Pilkings suddenly begins to hum the tango to which they were dancing before. Starts to execute a few practice steps. (36)

"Practicing" for their Argentinian dance – while they are dressed in the Yoruba clothes of a dead cult – in the hope that they will get "first prize at the ball" (25), Simon and Jane Pilkings think of dancing as a mere performance meant to entertain a European audience. The fact that they first appear to us as "shapes" coming out of the shadowy living-room and being scrutinized by Amusa, a "Native administration policeman" (Soyinka 2016, 24) who is shocked by such a sacrilegious treatment of traditional religious costumes, is significant: "He [Amusa] peeps through and observes the dancing couple, reacting with what is obviously a long-standing bewilderment. He stiffens suddenly, his expression changes to one of disbelief and horror" (24). This ominous scene mirrors and anticipates the audience's own reaction in front of the Pilkingses' profane dance that violates the sacred rules of the cult of the Ancestors.

- 12 In the same manner, the intensity and seriousness of the end of scene 3, which marks the beginning of Elesin's trance dance, are somewhat undercut by Simon and Jane Pilkings' ridiculous behaviour during the masked ball at the British Residency organized in honour of the Prince (scene 4). This caricatured ritual performed by the Pilkingses who use *Egungun* masks as fancy dress appears as an empty, meaningless ceremony in comparison with the King's horseman's "dance of death and redemption," to quote Jane Plastow,² a "regal" and "solemn" dance as the stage directions from scene 3 indicate: "His dance is one of solemn, regal motions, each gesture of the body is made with a solemn finality" (Soyinka 2016, 44). The "finality" of Elesin's transitional dance is precisely the renewal of his community and the preservation of a *limen*, a sacred space relating the mortal world to the world of the dead. The expected efficacious dimension of his "graceful" (47) trance dance thus strongly contrasts with the exclusively entertaining qualities of the Pilkingses' mocking dance. The description of Simon and Jane Pilkings's behaviour at the ball (scene 4) gives us an example of the process of misrepresentation of sacred rituals Soyinka talks about in "Morality and Aesthetics of the Ritual Archetype" (Soyinka 2005, 7). When these rituals are decontextualized and treated as mere tourist attractions, they turn into pure entertainment as the following stage directions from the play show:

The ritual of introductions soon takes in Pilkings and his wife. The Prince is quite fascinated by their costume and they demonstrate the adaptations they have made to it, pulling down the mask to demonstrate how the *egungun* normally appears, then showing the various press-button controls they have innovated for the face flaps, the sleeves, etc. They demonstrate the dance steps and the guttural sounds made by the *egungun*, harass other dancers in the hall, Mrs Pilkings playing the

'restrainer' to Pilkings's manic darts. Everyone is highly entertained, the Royal Party especially who lead the applause. (Soyinka 2016, 49-50)

In this passage, the repetition of the verb "demonstrate" as well as the allusion to Mrs Pilkings's acting qualities ("playing the restrainer") and the adaptations that have been made to the *Egungun* masks ("they demonstrate the adaptations they have made to it") illustrate the distortion of the ritual. The couple see the costumes they are wearing as lifeless clothes. But *Egungun* masks are a central element of Yoruba religious rites. During the ritual dance, the individual who is wearing the *Egungun* mask, a costume which hides the whole body, embodies the spirit of the ancestors. Thus, we are witnessing a blasphemous act of appropriation and transformation of traditional costumes for entertaining and almost anthropological purposes and for a European colonial audience: "everyone is highly entertained, the Royal Party especially" (50).

Elesin's dysfunctional trance dance: a failed communal ritual

- 13 Clearly, one could consider that this alternating dramaturgical structure only serves to emphasize the Nigerian scenes but still, Elesin's hypnotic dance ritual is marred by scene 4. The dance does not reach its purpose because it is interrupted by Simon Pilkings who does not understand the meaning of the ritual and interprets it as a violation of the law. This strategy that consists in interrupting the ritual thread of the play allows Soyinka to introduce a recurrent theme in his dramatic corpus: that of the crisis undergone by ritual forms, and generally speaking, by the values and ethos of the Nigerian community, from the colonial to the postcolonial period, in a modernized context where epistemological, ethical, psychological and religious landmarks are changing. Elesin's aborted trance dance is a good example of the double-edged dynamics underlying Soyinka's dramatic treatment of rituals which are both celebrated and staged with critical distance. The dance itself embodies the dysfunctional ritual as Soyinka invites us to reflect on the survival of traditional Yoruba rituals, which enables him to stage what Jeyifo identifies as "deep existential, social and epistemological alienations and crises in post-colonial Africa in particular, and more generally, in the modern world" (2004, 128). Let us add that Soyinka illustrates the dysfunction and the transformation of traditional ritual forms through different means. First of all, he uses a strategy of diversion which enables him not to represent the climax of Elesin's trance dance: indeed, the latter takes place off-stage, just like his son Olunde's ritualized suicide later on. At the end of scene 3, there is an abrupt shift from the trance dance to the ball taking place at the Residency and the audience is left unaware of the outcome of the ritual. This dramaturgical choice maintains suspense and creates a feeling of frustration among the readers and the audience at the same time, since we were beginning to plunge into the trance as well, a trance helped by the Praise-Singer's words (Soyinka 2016, 44-48) accompanying Elesin's mesmerizing choreography. However, if one takes a closer look at the concluding stage directions in scene 3, nothing seems to indicate that Elesin is hesitant or experiencing difficulties: "Elesin dances on, completely in a trance. The dirge wells up louder and stronger" (Soyinka 2016, 49). The audience is thus all the more surprised when they learn that the King's horseman has failed later on. Secondly, the ritual which Soyinka incorporates into his play does not follow the established rules since in the Oyo tradition, a son does not have the right to accomplish his father's own duty³ (Götrick 2000, 153). Thus, the

distancing effect created by this particular treatment of the ritual is double: the latter is relegated to a marginal space, and it does not even abide by the Yoruba tradition.

- 14 Olunde's unnatural ritual and Elesin's trance dance are dysfunctional communal rites which threaten the upholding of social and cosmic order instead of reinforcing it. Elesin's death as he strangles himself with his chains (after he has been arrested and put in prison by Pilkings) when he hears that his son Olunde has killed himself trying to erase his father's failure illustrates the character's downfall, and with him, the whole community's. Iyaloja sums up quite efficiently the unnatural aspect of the ritual of Olunde, who sacrifices himself: "There are some who choose to reverse the cycle of our being" (Soyinka 2016, 77). The Praise-Singer's words at the end of the play also describe the unexpected reversal of the roles played by father and son by equating it with a disruption of the natural order through a metaphorical reference to plant life: "But this young shoot has poured its sap into the parent stalk, and we know this is not the way of life. Our world is tumbling in the void of strangers" (83). These words – which evoke a dysfunctional family tree – are particularly striking especially since it was the Praise-Singer who insisted on the necessity of keeping the world on its axis at the beginning of the play (Soyinka 2016, 8). By collapsing into the void, the Yoruba community has not only lost the metaphysical challenge it was facing but also the political one which opposed it to the British, hence the bitter expression "the void of strangers." This is a case of shared fault here since the plunge of the Yoruba "world" "over the edge of the bitter precipice" (82) described by the Praise-Singer earlier is due not only to the interference of "evil strangers" (82) but also to Elesin's own weakness. He himself admits having lacked mental strength and will at the crucial moment of the dance of transition, despite his apparent self-confidence at the beginning of the play: "my weakness came not merely from the abomination of the white man who came violently into my fading presence, there was also a weight of longing on my earth-held limbs" (71). As we argued earlier, in the stage directions of the published play, the audience does not witness Elesin's hesitation during his ritual dance. On the contrary, his own words suggest that he is ready to die: "I have freed myself of earth and now / It's getting dark. Strange voices guide my feet" (Soyinka 2016, 46). In that perspective, it is interesting to focus on a 1994 staging of the play by Jide Ogunbade at the National Theatre in Lagos (Nigeria) in which, contrary to the original play, Elesin's vacillation and inner flaw, which disrupts the cosmic and social rules of his community, was put forward in and through the choreography itself.⁴ Ogunbade's dramatic choices are particularly convincing considering the context of the play.
- 15 In this staging of *Death and the King's Horseman*, the complete loss of balance (a literal and figurative balance) engendered by the dysfunctional dance is fully represented whereas the stage directions describing Elesin's ritual dance in the play are vague, centering more on the dancer's deep trance than on his loss of landmarks: "Elesin is now sunk fully deep in his trance, there is no longer sign of any awareness of his surroundings [...] Elesin dances on, completely in a trance [...]" (Soyinka 2016, 47–49). Indeed, if the readers of the play understand that the ritual dance is a profoundly unstable and difficult initiatory process, it is partly thanks to the context, namely the characters' conversations that often focus on the matter of cosmic balance and the terrifying possibility of the fall of the world into the void if the King's horseman were to lose control. In the final scene of the play, thanks to the Praise-Singer's words, one understands that the characters' worst fears have materialized: "Elesin, we placed the

reins of the world in your hands yet you watched it plunge over the edge of the bitter precipice" (82). Another element shows that Elesin's ritual dance has been interrupted. Indeed, during Jane Pilkings and Olunde's conversation in scene 4, the stage directions indicate an abrupt shift and then an interruption of the rhythm of the drums accompanying the horseman's trance dance: "The drums come over, still distant but more distinct. There is a change of rhythm, it rises to a crescendo and then, suddenly, it is cut off" (60).

- 16 In the production of the play at the National Theatre in Lagos, the inherent instability of the ritual experience is put forward as Elesin's trance dance is staged as an initiatory process where the dancer turns into a tightrope walker. Elesin's inner flaw is materialized in a creative way: at the end of the trance dance, the horseman seems to be laboriously climbing along a glowing, fluorescent slope as a funambulist would. The whole choreography leads to this final representation of the difficulty of walking along the path that connects the mortal world to the otherworld. The darkening of the stage and the shift in Elesin's movements during his dance stress his increasing loss of landmarks as he slowly penetrates into the troubling obscurity of transition.
- 17 At the beginning of the dance, Elesin's gestures are essentially made up of arm movements. The dancer executes rotational movements with his arms stretched upwards towards the sky. When the dialogue with the Praise-Singer begins, the rhythm of the drums and the dance quickens. Elesin's arm movements are more rapid and seem to be desynchronized as though he were possessed and did not control his body anymore. In parallel to this shift in rhythm, the women's singing, which had started earlier, intensifies. Although such a way of rendering the intensification of the trance corresponds to the stage directions of the play ("Elesin's trance appears to be deepening, his steps heavier" [Soyinka 2016, 47]), it also adds a chaotic dimension to Elesin's body language that foreshadows his inner contradictions and the final loss of balance. It is a particularly interesting staging choice to make given the context of the play mentioned earlier. The horseman's arms and legs rise and move frantically and the dancer almost falls, standing on the edge of the fault line of transition between the world of the living and the world of the ancestors.
- 18 After a return to calm during which Elesin executes his initial arm movements again, the dancer is seen climbing – with great instability – along a fluorescent slope. Thus, at the end of scene 3, in the Lagos production, the emphasis is put on the possibility of Elesin's failure to accomplish his ritual duty while the final stage directions of the scene in the published play remain neutral and do not really give us any clues about the outcome of this trance dance, except if we consider that the adjective used to describe Elesin's gestures, "weighty," suggests just the opposite of an unstable posture such as that which was staged in the Lagos production: "Elesin's dance does not lose its elasticity but his gestures become, if possible, more weighty" (49).
- 19 One could argue that materializing the horseman's lack of balance in the trance dance itself – and metaphorically his inner vacillation and flaws – breaks the suspense left intact in the original version of the play. However, given the fact that the themes of cosmic and social instability are prevalent in the play, and more generally speaking, in Soyinka's plays, Jide Ogunbade's choice to stage these themes through the medium of the dancing body and not just the characters' dialogues, appears to be fully justified.
- 20 In *Death and the King's Horseman*, the dance ritual is flawed not only because of outside and foreign forces embodied by Simon Pilkings but also because of inner negative

energies that tie Elesin to the pleasures of the world of the living despite his best intentions. The fault line existing between his will and his actions leads to the rupture of the cosmic and social status quo, all the more so when his own son commits the unnatural deed of killing himself to correct the ills his father's failure has caused. In the play, the deaths of the father and the son are in vain, which shows that the sacrificial ritual paradigm that was respected by the Yoruba community up until now is teetering in front of the numerous changes society is undergoing.

- 21 Nevertheless, I am not suggesting that Soyinka categorically condemns traditional ritual forms as outmoded and inadequate. It would be more appropriate to say that he stages the difficulties of survival characterizing some traditional rituals in a specific, modern socio-political context, while maintaining some kind of fascination for the same rituals that resist, as best as they can, the cultural and religious impact of colonial modernity and the modernization of society by refusing to disappear completely. Thus, the originality and critical potential of the play lies in the fault line between the two opposite dramatic trajectories Soyinka chooses to confront us with, using the ritualized format both as a means to celebrate the collective force of traditional rituals and as a critical tool.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BROCKBANK, Philip. 2001. "Blood and Wine: Tragic Ritual from Aeschylus to Soyinka." In *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity*, edited by Biodun Jeyifo, 77–90. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- DAVID, Marie. 1995. *Wole Soyinka: A Quest for Renewal*. Madras, India: B.I. Publications.
- FIUPOU, Christiane. 1999. "Variations on Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*." *Matatu*, no. 20. Amsterdam; Atlanta: Rodopi, 229–40.
- GIBBS, James. 1986. *Wole Soyinka*. New York: Grove Press.
- GÖTRICK, Kacke. 2000. "Rituality and Liminality in Soyinka's Plays." *Anglophonia / Caliban* 7: 147–56.
- GRAHAM-WHITE, Anthony. 1976. "'Ritual' in Contemporary Theatre and Criticism." *Educational Theatre Journal* 28, no. 3: 318–24.
- JEIFO, Biodun. 2004. *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- KATRAK, Ketu. 1986. *Wole Soyinka and Modern Tragedy: A Study of Dramatic Theory and Practice*. Westport, CO: Greenwood Press.
- LARSEN, Stephan. 1983. *A Writer and his Gods: A Study of the Importance of Myths and Religious Ideas to the Writings of Wole Soyinka*. Stockholm: University of Stockholm Department of History Literature.
- OGUNBA, Oyin. 1975. *The Movement of Transition: A Study of the Plays of Wole Soyinka*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.

- OGUNBADE, Jide. 1994. *Death and the King's Horseman* (staging). National Theatre (Lagos). Video recording by Joachim Fiebach.
- SOYINKA, Wole. 1973. *Collected Plays 1. Wole Soyinka*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- SOYINKA, Wole. 1976. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- SOYINKA, Wole. 2002. *Samarkand and Other Poems I Have Known*. London: Methuen.
- SOYINKA, Wole. 2012. *Of Africa*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- SOYINKA, Wole. 2016. *Death and the King's Horseman*. 1975. London: London Bloomsbury Methuen Drama. With commentary and notes by Jane Plastow.

NOTES

1. In "Ritual' in Contemporary Theatre and Criticism," Anthony Graham-White reminds us that beyond the specific matters of disagreement that divide anthropologists in their definitions of "ritual," all agree to name the latter as an "efficacious action" producing consequences that lie beyond the end of the performance itself. He then adds that this concept of efficacy is nevertheless not entirely satisfactory if one tries to distinguish ritual forms from dramatic forms, taking the example of Noh theatre that was used in the fifteenth century for its supposedly therapeutic qualities (Graham-White 1976, 320–21). However, if theatre can be "efficacious," it has its own ways of being so: "Whatever effects a theatrical production may have are subjective: its enactors may hope to prepare the hearts of the spectators for future revolution [...] but these hoped-for results are not produced by the performance itself – a chain of further activities must bring them about" (Graham-White 1976, 322).
2. These words are borrowed from Jane Plastow in her notes to the play (Soyinka 2016, 88).
3. In "Rituality and Liminality in Soyinka's Plays," Kacke Götrick adds that "The ritual as referred to and depicted in the play is not commonly known to all Yoruba members but mainly to the Oyo Yoruba..." (Götrick 2000, 153).
4. Thanks to Christiane Fioupou, who attended the performance, I have had the great privilege to watch Joachim Fiebach's private video recording of the 1994 staging of the play by Jide Ogunbade in Lagos. See "Variations on Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*" (Fioupou 1999).

ABSTRACTS

This article focuses on the dysfunctional dance ritual that lies at the core of Wole Soyinka's 1975 play *Death and the King's Horseman* – a flawed ritual suicide that the main protagonist Elesin fails to accomplish, partly because of his inner weakness and flaws and partly because of the disruptive interference of the British District Officer, Simon Pilkings. I argue that the play questions the possibilities of survival of traditional ethics in a (post)colonial context where religious and cultural values have undergone profound changes. My contention is that Soyinka uses the ritual format not only as a cohesive and conciliatory dramaturgical aesthetics but also as a critical dissident tool that invites us to reflect on the conditions of the rebuilding of a

communal Nigerian identity in the modern era. The fault line lies both in the divide between Elesin's hubristic will to accomplish brilliantly his religious mission and its failed outcome, and in the dramaturgical aesthetics of the play itself as it confronts two opposed views on ritual. This confrontation opens up a new space for critical thinking.

INDEX

Keywords: Dance, ritual, traditions, rupture, failure, instability, Soyinka (W), Nigeria

AUTHOR

INÉS BIGOT

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès, laboratoire Centre for Anglophone Studies (CAS, UR 801)
Inés Bigot is a Senior Lecturer in postcolonial literatures at the University of Toulouse - Jean Jaurès. She holds a PhD from Sorbonne Nouvelle, *Danse et dissidence : dramaturgie de la résistance dans le théâtre de William Butler Yeats et de Wole Soyinka*. She was awarded the 2023 Irish Cultural Centre PhD Prize for her work and is currently working on the publication of her PhD. Her research – at a crossroads between theatre studies, dance studies, postcolonial and decolonial studies – focuses on the poetics and the politics of the rebellious dancing body in Irish and Nigerian theatre. Her publications include “De l’envers des mots au discours muet : danse et langage dans le théâtre de W. B. Yeats et de Wole Soyinka” (*Recherches en danse*, 2019), “Dance and Dissidence in Wole Soyinka’s Plays : From Status Quo to Revolution” (*Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 42.1, 2019) and “The Endless Dance of Contrapuntal Energy: Conflict and Disunity in Fighting the Waves” (*International Yeats Studies* 5.1, 2021).