The Death of Identity:
Exploring Cultural Appropriation and Silencing in Wole Soyinka’s

*Death and the King’s Horseman*

In 1807, the British enforced a prohibition on the slave trade that marked the beginning of colonialism in West Africa. In 1975, Wole Soyinka, a Nigerian playwright descended from Yoruba roots, wrote *Death and the King’s Horseman*, a play based on the real account of British colonial forces stopping the deceased Yoruba king’s horseman from committing suicide in 1946. Considering how “Soyinka applied a national dimension to the setting of [his] plays where [one encounters] the difficult concept of the federal state in colonial and post-colonial Africa,” then the horseman and chief in question, Olori Elesin, functions as an Jungian archetype signifying native Yoruba tradition inhibited by the federal British state (Ricard 159). Herein, a background on Yoruba cosmology will detail how the restrictions enforced against Elesin by colonial forces expresses the mutagenic influence Britain retained over the Yoruba people, which creates contradictions in the play that Soyinka uses to further distance the separate identities of the characters while also showing their innate, unifying humanity. As the colonial nature of the play dictates, the characters center around identities of community and the Other, of insiders and outsiders, that work on both sides from the colonist perspectives of Simon and Jane Pilkings, the District officer and his wife, and the vantage of the indigenous given by Elesin. Thereafter, Olunde, the prodigal son of Elesin who returns to bury his father after receiving a medical
education in Britain, operates as an aspect of the socially marginalized native Yoruba when Jane Pilkings, having donned sacred dress of the Yoruba people, uses her dominating power to silence him. As Jane silences Olunde, Simon attempts to silence Elesin by stopping his ritual death. These actions communicatively disable these expressions of native cultural identity, and, along with the silencing of that identity, the Pilkings appropriate Yoruba culture in wearing the ancestral egungun outfits of the native people as costumes.

In her thesis on the appropriation of traditional music practices in modern Yoruba drama, Oyebade Dosunmu provides background on Yoruba cosmology and belief in the afterlife when she states:

The Yoruba believe their dead to be always with them, playing important roles in their everyday life. Although, indeed, they are departed, they are not deceased. From their vantage spiritual plane, they continue to watch over and protect their own, and their own in turn continue to acknowledge and supplicate them through prayers and offerings. (37)

The two major considerations here are the cosmological impact of interfering with Elesin’s ritual death as well as the Yoruba’s “own” and how that interacts with the Pilkings’s appropriation of that culture. Without reducing Elesin’s sacrifice to a “barbaric” or “feudal” custom as Jane describes, the impact of Elesin’s failed self-death has importance (Soyinka 43). Without his horseman’s guidance, the deceased king is left to wander “in the void of transition because his trusted horseman hesitates” (Dosunmu 65-66). This is the metaphysical confrontation Soyinka sets up in his play, 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” (Soyinka 3). The “void of transition” that the unborn crawl through to enter life and
that the departed go through to the afterlife is disrupted by Elesin’s failure to commit death. This failure exemplifies a dissolution of identity within Elesin. He soliloquizes, “My weakness came not merely from the abomination of the white man who came violently into my fading presence . . . the white ghost entered and all was defiled” (53). With Elesin working as a Jungian archetype signifying indigenous Yoruba tradition, he asserts the corruption of tradition comes from the presence of alien forces. Erich Hatala Matthes writes on cultural appropriation and how “assimilation . . . might be among the harms of cultural appropriation” (348). By this, Elesin’s weakening of character is proportional to the Pilkings’s usurpation of egungun dress. They lessen Yoruba culture to enforce their own. Following this play of forces, “it is possible to conceive Death and the King’s Horseman as an extended ritual” (Dosunmu 42). Through reducing the power of tradition by converting it to a costume, the Pilkings create a displacement of power in Yorubaland that is echoed by the disruption in the “void of transition.”

Continuing on the vein of Yoruba cosmology in which the dead “watch over and protect their own, and their own in turn continue to acknowledge and supplicate them through prayers and offerings,” the idea of the Yoruba “own” deserves consideration when establishing parameters for the community and the Other. Matthes quotes James O. Young who says, “The concept of cultural appropriation has no application unless insiders and outsiders, members and nonmembers of a culture can be distinguished” (354). Written down for publication, the character description and dialogue of the play carry the weight of this burden. The cast of characters can be sorted to list each player as insider or outsider to Yoruba. Elesin holds a position of great importance to the community. As the king’s horseman and chief, he carries traditional responsibilities that, as previously stated, construct him as an archetypal representative of the Yoruba culture. The Pilkings stand in contrast to Elesin as colonial aliens.
Their identities as colonists and the presence of colonialism in Niger in this period must be separated from the independent autonomy of Yoruba culture though the district does not have its own liberty. In “the universe of the Yoruba mind,” the Pilkings are Other (Soyinka 3). Though the Pilkings are characterized with moralities and ethics aligned with Western culture, the appropriation of Yoruba culture through the *egungun* garments they wear throughout the play work as an amplification of their Otherness. Sergeant Amusa explains that the dress “belong[s] to a dead cult, not for a human being”—much less an outsider—yet for the Pilkings to assume the dress is, in Yoruba culture, to assume the “reincarnated spirits of ancestors” (19, 20). By appropriating the culture through wearing the *egungun* garb, the Pilkings usurp the lineage of Yoruba and reduce its history to a costume. The Pilkings also reveal their distance from the indigenous culture through dialogue. As the drums beat for Elesin’s wedding and death, Jane reveals that she “thought all bush drumming sounded the same” (21). This stands in direct contrast to the great importance of music in Yoruba culture, and it presents a dramatic irony to a Yoruba audience for the fact that Soyinka “uses music for characterization, mood generation and the appeal to a sense of communal aesthetics” in line with his native culture (Dosumnu 69). The music of the drum carries meaning for the Yoruba people. The Pilkings’s lack of understanding for the importance of Elesin’s ritual—carried farther than confiscating the *egungun* dress after the king’s death and having no concept of the cause or meaning behind the drumming—has a basis in the disconnect in the languages of the characters.

Amusa showcases this disconnect in his report to Simon when he states that “one prominent chief, namely, the Elesin Oba, is to commit death tonight as a result of native custom” (Soyinka 20). The distinctive word choice wherein Elesin would commit “death” instead of “suicide” has weight. An argument may be asserted that Amusa has a faulty grasp on the English
language, which resulted in him merely having misspoken in his report. There is a basis for this argument when he can be quoted saying, “What you think you do,” “Mista Pirinkin,” or “I cannot talk this matter,” but Amusa’s deficiencies in English spring from accent and syntactical errors (19). His word choice here should not be discounted as it highlights a cultural lack of connotation between ritual suicide and ritual death that does exist in the English language. Because Amusa possesses understanding of Yoruba culture even though he is a converted Muslim, he represents a hybrid type of character within the play. When acted on a stage, Western minds may consider that members and nonmembers of Yoruba culture can be evidenced through a black/white racial casting. This would be a mistake and reduction of the black identity to fit Yoruba culture, which is a facet of the many cultures to be found in Africa just as the Pilkings represent the British facet of European culture at large. Amusa exists as both insider and outsider simultaneously. He presents a foil to the Pilkings’s appropriation through his understanding and detachment from Yoruba culture as he also attempts to distance himself from the Pilkings because he sees their actions as negative or harmful. He finds it difficult to present the case on Elesin because “how can a man talk against death to [a] person in uniform of death?” (19). He posits that to do so would be like “talking against government to person in uniform of police” (19). This argument, coupled with his doubled cultural identity, furthers Soyinka’s “difficult concept of the federal state in colonial and post-colonial Africa” (Ricard 159). Amusa presents the analogy of the federal colonial state in contrast with the cosmological qualities inherent to egungun dress, which further supports the extended ritual Soyinka builds within the play through the power displacements taking place in the Yorubaland that is paralleled in the “void of transition.”
Another character within the play presents a similar cultural duality: Olunde, Elesin’s son. Having left the Yoruba to study medicine in Britain, Olunde returns, his cultural roots intact, with a wider view on the displacements taking place in his homeland. Engaging in a dialogue with Jane, the two characters present contradictions to further showcase the separate identities of the Yoruba and the colonial Other. When Simon teases that Jane has become “a social anthropologist,” he presents a verbal irony, a contradiction highlighting the ignorance of the Pilkings as they stand in egungun dress. Jane believes the outfits she and her husband wear are “all in a good cause” for when she will be presented to her Prince, but Olunde reveals the contradiction where the good cause Jane pursues for her own culture comes at a cost in which she “desecrate[s] an ancestral mask” of the Yoruba (Soyinka 41). Yet, the Pilkings’s ignorance abounds, justified in their eyes as their servant, Joseph, claims that as good Christians “black man juju can’t touch” them (23). Their ignorant contradiction is proved in the closing of the play when Iyaloja, a Yoruba matriarchal figure, calls Simon a child who “usurps[s] the vestments of our dead, yet believe that the stain of death will not clinging to you” (62). Iyaloja says this after Olunde kills himself to complete the ritual his father fails. Elesin, wracked with grief, wills himself to death, and the Pilkings are left with two bodies when only one would have died had they not interfered. Olunde warns that Simon is “wasting his time,” but the Pilkings do not listen and greater life is lost (43). Again, the purpose of this research is not to argue against or for any cultural/religious practices resulting in death but merely to bring light to the disparities brought on through the appropriation of culture at the same time that the Pilkings attempt to usurp their own norms on the Yoruba people.

The most powerful contradiction Soyinka presents in the play comes in the dialogue between Olunde and Jane concerning a dead sea captain. When a British ship had become
dangerous to other ships and the coastal population, a captain “blew himself up with it. Deliberately” (41). Olunde believes that the captain’s self-sacrifice “is an affirmative commentary on life” (42). Possibly sensing some argumentative discourse in Olunde’s words, Jane counters that “life should never be thrown deliberately away” before she attempts to negate the subject by saying that “the whole thing was probably exaggerated anyway” (42). Olunde uses Jane’s words against her to say “that was a risk the captain couldn’t take” (42). The contradiction here deals with the captain’s self-death, which Jane interprets as an honorable sacrifice because “there was no other way to save lives,” while Elesin’s self-death has been considered, in the Pilkings’s colonial eyes, as “a barbaric custom” (43). The word “suicide” has been purposely disregarded here so as to avoid the negative connotations associated with the word. Now, the difference between the captain’s and Elesin’s self-deaths is a corporeal versus ethereal—“void of transition”—one. While the captain saved lives in the physical word, Elesin’s journey into the “void of transition” is meant to bring equilibrium to both worlds. Without his sacrifice, the spiritual world of the Yoruba is thrown out of balance. The consequences of this for the Yoruba people are great, seeing as the physical and spiritual worlds overlap as children cross the void to this life, the dead depart back through it, and the spirits of the ancestors “watch over and protect their own” (Dosunmu 37). This brings back the importance of the egungun dress, which is considered as the ancestors’ reincarnated spirits. Just as Olunde wants to properly carry out his father’s funeral rights, Elesin’s ritual must be completed lest he “jeopardise the welfare of [his] people” (46). As the captain did, Elesin wishes to save his people from harm. Olunde presents an argument that both self-deaths are meant as selfless acts of sacrifice for a greater good that bring honor to those who give up their lives.
Jane sees no value in honor gained through Elesin’s self-death, though Olunde has tried to make her see the discrepancy in that through the story of the sea captain. She argues that Elesin has protection from the ritual granted by Simon, yet Olunde argues that the ritual is protection. He knows Jane has nothing to “offer [Elesin] in place of his peace of mind, in place of the honour and veneration of his own people” (43). The “own” of the Yoruba identity is at play again. The ritual and its completion are a necessity to assure the protection of Elesin’s identity. His assimilation of colonial beliefs, the “sapping of [his] will” brought “from the abomination of the white man” threatens to displace his identity, which becomes a death in and of itself for Elesin in Simon’s “protective” custody (53). Elesin’s peace of mind comes with the “honour and veneration of his own people” (43). The Pilkings do not understand this. It is a continuance of their ignorance of Yoruba culture. Evidence of this comes in the fifth scene when Elesin is imprisoned and tells Simon that “the night is not at peace.” When Simon “would have said it was” because the night was “quiet,” Elesin reveals the contradiction in their two identities by asking, “Does quiet mean peace for you?” (50). These two men are pursuing the same thing—peace—in vastly different ways. Both men want to save lives just as the captain did. This is the truth Olunde wants Jane to realize.

However, to admit to a lack of understanding, much less that she is wrong, would shift the colonial power play the Pilkings have established, so she must silence Olunde to maintain it. When Matthes speaks of cultural appropriation, he explains that it is “harmful because of the way in which it interacts with dominating systems so as to silence and speak for individuals who are already socially marginalized” (349). The Pilkings interfere with the ritual because they believe they can do better. They can save lives. For an elaboration on the silencing taking place in Yoruba, Matthes quotes Ishani Maitra who says that a “speaker can become ‘communicatively
disabled’ because ‘she is unable to fully successfully perform her intended communicative act’” (350). Interpreting that “she” as a “he,” Olunde can be seen as disabled by Jane’s silencing when she says he “announce[s] [his] father’s own death like a surgeon looking down on some strange . . . stranger’s body! [He’s] just a savage like all the rest” (Soyinka 45). Olunde, who has been influenced by both Yoruba and British culture, is compared to a savage. His formal training as a surgeon in a “civilized” British university has been reduced to unfeeling savagery that Jane extends to every member of Yoruba culture. This presents the faulty comprehension of African cultures taking place in European minds. Dosumnu speaks on this in her thesis:

The earliest researchers of African cultures were European scholars who, as earlier discussed, were interested in these cultures only in as much as they provided extant evidences—imagined or otherwise—on the primitive, and therefore inaccessible, past of European cultures. This evolutionist groping into the past formed the theoretical and analytical framework upon which ideas of African cultures were formed. (43)

By viewing Olunde and the Yoruba as primitive, Jane has placed their identities and beliefs in the past and established European ideals as evolutionarily superior. Jane asserts that Olunde is less than she, which effectively silences him. Jane begins to sob, and Olunde “[turns to go]” in the next line (Soyinka 45). Again, with Matthes quoting Miranda Flicker, considering how Jane’s “prejudice corrupts hearers’ judgements of speaker credibility,” the breakdown of Olunde’s argument with Jane does not stem from a weakness in his rhetoric but in his identity’s social power (350). When the Aide-de-Camp questions, “who the hell asked [his] opinion,” Olunde replies, “nobody” (Soyinka 45). This is not Odysseus being clever; this is a man comprehending the vast limitations of his power. The same silencing takes place with Elesin. By stopping his
ritual, he cannot complete his “‘communicative act’” and becomes disabled by silence. As he functions as archetype, Elesin’s prison extends as a silencing factor for all Yoruba since his silencing, the interference with his ritual, affects all of his people.

*Death and the King’s Horseman* is Soyinka giving voice back to a culture that was silenced through a colonial power structure that appropriated it to lessen its virtue and strength. The strong belief of the Yoruba in their cosmology and the “void of transition” being disrupted by colonial interference meant nothing to these nonmembers who, by seeking to spread their own self-claimed enlightenment, sought to silence the expression of belief in a marginalized group. Olunde, knowing both spheres of culture intimately, tried to express to the ruling power, Jane, that in his time in Britain he “saw nothing, finally, that gave [her] the right to pass judgement on other peoples and their ways. Nothing at all” (44). Yet, still existing as Yoruba, existing as African, existing as black, Olunde’s opinion is silenced. When Elesin’s ritual is silenced and he cannot commit death, Olunde takes his place, which is the strongest act capable of counteracting this silence. This play tells a story of humanity trying to save lives, but humanity has facets of culture, some of which have been given less shine. The Pilkings aimed to do well in the wrong way. They did not try to gain an understanding of another culture by which they could effectively communicate with the people of Yoruba. Instead, they reduced the culture to primitive savagery, imprisoned a leader in the community, and sought to silence this ritual expression of culture all while insulting the indigenous population by desecrating the sacred dress of the dominated group by treating it as a costume. This play tells a story of misunderstanding and a lack of care on the part of the Pilkings. Olunde attempts to shed light on culture. He claims an understanding of both spheres of influence existing in Yoruba and could act as moderator between these peoples given the chance, but silencing this representative of a
marginalized group brings greater death to Yoruba and extinguishes a cultural practice as Olunde is never said to have a son to carry on the traditions of a horseman. All in all, Olunde’s countering the Pilkings’s appropriation and silencing through his own ritual death, though a powerful move for the sake of his people and possible enlightenment of colonial forces, marks the death of the identity of the horseman in Yoruba culture. Unless Elesin’s bride finds herself with child, then “the sap in the plantain” does run dry (17). No son may carry on, and death swallows identity.
Works Cited


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