

---

## African Ethnophilosophical Approach to Yoruba and Ijaw Imagination of Tragedy: Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and J. P. Clark's *Song of a Goat*

Omeh Obasi Ngwoke, PhD  Okwudiri Anasiudu, PhD

Department of English Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

✉Corresponding Author: Omeh Obasi Ngwoke. E-mail: [omeh.ngwoke@uniport.edu.ng](mailto:omeh.ngwoke@uniport.edu.ng)

---

### ARTICLE INFORMATION    ABSTRACT

---

**Volume:** 4

**Issue:** 2 | 2022

**DOI:**10.5281/zenodo.7813960

---

#### KEYWORDS

Tragedy, Africa Drama, Ijaw, Yoruba, African-Ethnophilosophy

This paper explores the representation of tragedy in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and J. P. Clark's *Song of a Goat* within the framework of African ethnophilosophy. The paper argues that tragedy is a universal concept but varies in meaning across different indigenous cosmologies. The study identifies a research gap in the lack of consideration of African worldviews on tragedy. The paper sheds light on how African tragedy could be fictionally represented, with a particular focus on the collective nature of the effect of tragedy and the importance of ancestors, bloodline, and cosmic harmony. The paper highlights how Soyinka and Clark's plays depart slightly from the Aristotelian tradition and underscore their commitment to the project of decolonization of African discourse and pedagogy from the prescriptivism of euro-western orthodoxy on tragedy. The paper argues that in African cosmologies, the effect of tragedy transcends the individual to include the collective and is a result of the disruption of the cosmic bond or harmony within the collective.

---

### 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of tragedy is ubiquitous and at the same time differentiated by its contextual peculiarities. This could be observed in the various forms of the expression of tragedy across cultures and academic spaces. Particularly in the academia, Ato Quayson notes that it encompasses “not only literary texts, but also philosophy, religion, theology, anthropology, art” (“Preface and Acknowledgments” x). This capacious nature of tragedy makes it susceptible to variegated views or interpretations. Sadly, the dominant thought on the subject of tragedy has, for long, been pigeon-holed by the Aristotelian Attic worldview. This Attic worldview defines tragedy as, “an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude, in a language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts, performed by actors, not through narrative; effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions” (*Poetics* 10).

Calling attention to Aristotle's definition as a background to this introduction is deliberate as it has directed the thrust of criticism on the subject from such wider global perspectives as offered by Arthur Miller, Philip Sidney, Hegel and Boal to the African cosmo-ontological representations such as in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and J. P. Clark's *Song of a Goat*.

Aristotle's view is problematized by its prescriptivism, monolithic orthodoxy, sexism, elitism and catharsis. Thus, for emphasis, this paper examines Yoruba and Ijaw worldviews on the subject of tragedy in order to mark a departure from the Aristotelian tradition and privileges the African ethnophilosophical concerns using Wole Soyinka and J. P. Clark's plays as primary texts for analysis. The aesthetic designs in the plays demonstrate the playwrights' commitment to decolonising African discourse and pedagogy from euro-western orthodoxy on tragedy. In this paper, we place Olunde's voluntary sacrifice in paradigmatic relation to Elesin's indifference to the ancestors' demand, and Zifa's pride/ego and impotence as the tragic substances in the plays. Such representation conflates the Yoruba and Ijaw tragic spirits with their indigenous cosmologies. In the same vein, it accentuates a cosmic bond or fracture in the affinity between the living, the living dead, the unborn and the ancestors and the importance of this symbiotic relationship in these cosmic universes. The consequences of this fracture are usually apocalyptic or tragic to the life of the community and can only be resolved through a propitiatory ritual sacrifice depending on the offence.

### **The Euro-western vs the African View on Tragedy**

The publication of Aristotle's *Poetics* in the 5th century BC, seemed to have laid the foundations of the tragic mode. Most conversations on that drama sub-genre down the ages appear to have drawn from the prescriptions made by the philosopher in that book. Given their spread and influence, the Eurocentric tragic postulations of Aristotle appear to constitute the universal tradition of tragedy. This is worsened by the adherence of most classical tragedians, their Renaissance and contemporary offspring to the Aristotelian model, thus, making it seem that the tragic "contours were permanently set by the Greeks, Shakespeare, and the Renaissance tradition" (Quayson, "Question of Method" 301).

The height of tragedy's popularity as a literary genre is perhaps to be seen in the avalanche of critical responses that has trailed its aesthetic enunciation by the philosopher. Particularly significant among these are the disagreements on some of the philosopher's suppositions and, of course, the fresh and illuminating insights advanced by seasoned scholars in their efforts to either interpret the intentions of Aristotle or to expand on the nature, role and the changing fortunes of tragedy in the succeeding centuries. Some of the most discussed Aristotelian tragic notions are those associated with the nobility of action and status of the tragic hero (kingly or aristocratic), his moral frailties (tragic flaw) in spite of this status, the effects of the hero's eventual fall on the audience (pity and fear), and of course the aftermath of those effects (catharsis). The scope of this study will not permit an in-depth review of the existing conversations; hence a few representative critical positions will suffice. On the status of the tragic hero, Arthur Miller is particularly relevant in his rejection of the Aristotelian aristocrat insisting that "a common man is as apt a subject of tragedy as the kings were" since both characters are capable of eliciting the same ... if put in the same ... circumstance (745). Even more daring on the subject matter is George Hegel who underscored the possibility of a female tragic hero in his description of Antigone as such (*Death of God* 116). On catharsis, Kenneth Muir has argued, contrary to Aristotle, that the effect of tragedy is to "increase, not diminish our pity and terror" (367); Philip Sidney has advanced a moral dimension to the issue stressing that tragedy could also instil

***African Ethnophilosophical Approach to Yoruba and Ijaw Imagination of Tragedy: Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman and J. P. Clark's Song of a Goat***

morality and make kings dread and avoid tyranny (45); while Hegel has challenged Aristotle's failure to recognize how tragedy evokes and orchestrates an emotion of reconciliation of moral imbalance (116). Even the capacity of tragedy to be galvanized as a tool for revolution has been discussed by Augusto Boal (*Theatre of the Oppressed* 47).

Is the Euro-western tradition of tragedy truly universal or is there a distinctly African alternative? If there is a distinctly African tragic aesthetics, are there some areas of intersection or influence between it and that of Europe? While we argue that diversities in culture and belief systems account for differences in aesthetic values and principles of literary creativity, it is indisputable that there may be certain shared principles and that such political and economic relations as colonialism and trade between the west and the rest of the world would have introduced influences. The European tradition seems to have indeed influenced, inspired or even placed certain constraints on tragic imaginations globally, for instance, in the area of naming (see Chinaka and Anasiudu 36; Drapper, qtd. in Nwahunanya 145; Nwabueze 66; Al-Hakim 376). Clark's indigenization of the tragic mode as foregrounded by his choice of title for the play, *Song of a Goat*, could be said to allude to the same Aristotelian influence as Isidore Okpewho rightly submits:

The old Aristotelian derivation of the word *tragedy* as a goat song was given a graphic endorsement, at the dawn of postcolonial African dramatic history, by the Nigerian poet-playwright John Pepper Clark. Newly graduated from University College in Ibadan—a colonial institution where the old European classics were taken quite as seriously as in their home base—Clark produced and later published his first play, *Song of a Goat*, demonstrating “in title and action, that a tragic mode might be as indigenously African as it was Greek. Central to this drama, which explores the counterplay of impotence and fertility in a traditional family, is the role of a goat. The original Nigerian production of the play called for the slaughter of a goat as a communal rite. When, however, the play was produced at the Commonwealth Festival of the Arts in London in 1965, cultural differences dictated the replacement of the Nigerian example with a milder but not much more successful al-alternative. (“Anxiety of Empire” 55)

Is there a tragedy in an African context? This question becomes pertinent considering that “all serious discussions of literary tragedy in the twentieth century made almost no reference either to what was happening outside of Euro-America or indeed to postcolonial literary examples” (Quayson, “Question of Method” 301). The various Quaysonian parameters such as modalities of expression, material conditions, and other multidimensional qualities of tragedy across cultures place the answer to the above question in the affirmative. There is indeed an African view of tragedy some of whose aesthetic principles differ from the Euro-western. The first may be found in what Soyinka in *Myth, Literature and the African World* describes as the “metaphysics of the irreducible” while responding to George Steiner's generalized view on the demise of tragedy. Steiner had argued that tragedy's “organic world view” which is composed of “mythological, symbolic and ritual reference” finally collapsed in the seventeenth century with the modernist “triumph of rationalism and secular metaphysics” (qtd. in Topper 66). In his response to Steiner, Soyinka makes an exception for the African ritual which, he insists, is insulated from European modernity by its immanent “assimilative wisdom” and “metaphysics of the irreducible.” Soyinka's response to Steiner is captured succinctly by Topper by means of a paraphrase thus: “According to Soyinka, the ‘assimilative wisdom of African metaphysics’

protects indigenous cosmologies from the collapse of ritual frames of reference coinciding with European modernity" (Topper 66).

The second aesthetic principle may be in terms of who bears the consequence of tragedy, which is an aspect that this study focuses on. The Euro-western view of tragedy suggests that the consequence or punishment of tragedy is borne by the individual alone, but in the African context, the consequences of tragedy as would be shown in the discussion of our primary texts are collective or communal. Thus, we could describe tragedy in an African context as that which poses a threat to the collective life, social well-being, survival and health of the community. This threat is capable of disrupting what Ryan Topper calls "the ontological continuum of time itself" ("Sacrificial Foundation" 63). In this milieu, the community bears the brunt of the tragic catastrophe even if it is an act initiated by an individual. This is based on the understanding that the individual is an integral part of the community.

The third could be found in the social semiotic variation of the ideological material used for the portrayal of tragedy to capture indigenous ethnophilosophies. This is an important point that Odoh Onyeka Emeka missed in his analysis of *Song of a Goat*. Odoh makes a very lame attempt at debunking what he calls the "Afrocentric positions on the said play" by ignoring the obvious African ethnophilosophical worldview that the play evinces ("Tragic Vision" 48). Martin Esslin also overlooks this issue of divergent worldviews in his exploration of Clark's use of archetype in *Song of a Goat* describing it as an imitation of Aeschylus' craft. In this regard, Omeh Ngwoke notes that "Esslin seems not to appreciate the fact that while the source materials may be universal, their use is more of an idiosyncratic affair coloured by taste and the social, cultural, religious, moral and ideological differences of writers" ("Use of Archetypes" 61).

The fourth aesthetic principle is the robust relationship between the supernatural and the natural (this does not mean that every form of African tragedy follows this configuration). Elechi Amadi echoes the foregoing assertion in his submission that attention should be paid "to our interactions with a greater power than we can contradict" ("Gods and Tragic Heroes" 69). While identifying *Isiburu* as the play in which Amadi test-runs this tragic model, Omeh Ngwoke adjudges this contribution by Amadi as "significant because of its newness and because of its focus on an aspect of the tragic enterprise that is not just different from those of other critics, but which seems to have been overlooked by Aristotle himself" ("*Experimenting*" 41). Notably, this insight is "a reflection of those worldviews which separate and profoundly affect the relations of art and life in differing cultures" (Soyinka, *African World* 44). The foregoing is evident in indigenous cosmologies in Africa where the natural and supernatural are mutually in-exclusive as they are woven together to regulate sociological imagination, events and lived experiences. Such indigenous communities where such worldviews thrive are:

...surrounded and penetrated by rites and rituals. Such events as birth and death, initiation and marriage, planting and harvesting, drought and rain, are freighted with symbolism, finding visible expression in the accompanying cults and customs. The invisible background of this symbolism consists of the different

myths that connect the particularities of life with the totality of being. Heaven and earth, life and death, weakness and power are put into perspective by the recollection and affirmation of a meaningful world that unifies the scattered pieces of common experience. Against this background, people live and act and orient themselves. (Dupré, *Primitive Cultures* 68)

The matrix of the supernatural and natural is a recurrent motif in the popular film-cum-literary media in the continent of Africa where the tragic hero exists to present a group-felt experience, which means that what happens to him is felt by all the people involved in the story. The tragic protagonist in such a context identifies with the community which bears the brunt (in terms of crop failure, death, diseases, and famine) of the tragic hero's suffering and fall. Such film-cum-literary representations capture the harmonious relationship among all beings in the cosmic universe such as the living, the dead (which includes the ancestors), other supernatural beings, and the unborn (Soyinka, *Myth 2*). This is to emphasize the cosmic synergy of the physical earth, which co-exists with the "realm of the infinite" and other transcendental regions like the underworld.

It must, however, be observed that the idea of cosmic harmony was not originally peculiar to the African world; it was rather a universal phenomenon until its severance in the European cosmology by the admission of alien belief systems. The result is that such a relationship is now considered as mere fantasies in the European imagination (Soyinka, *Myth 4*). Generally speaking, the co-existence of universal beings could be truncated by disobedience, defilement and desecration of the land in violation of an instruction. The resultant effect of such a disruption could be averted by sacrificial death offered as arbitration to close the "chthonic realm"; a domain which houses a destructive force within the realm of infinity. It is the consequence triggered by the cosmic fracture of the synergy between human beings, ancestors, spirit beings, and non-human/spirit members of the indigenous cosmology that is the aetiological argument of tragedy in an African context. Such a view illuminates the African indigenous belief in life after death and can help one to come to terms with the African philosophy of death (which in Yoruba is *iku*), life (*ife*) and life after death (*aye atun wa*). This is because death is merely a transition of the spiritual self to another plane of reality. According to Akinola Mohammed Akomolafe, the belief:

in life after death goes on to further entail that at the separation of the body from the soul at death (absolute death), the human soul moves into a new world or returns to this world, where it continues its existence again. By this, it means that life that each person has is first lived in this physical world, followed by eternal life in the hereafter or a return to life in the old or a new body. ("Yoruba Ontology" 39)

Clyde W. Ford also captures the bond, rapport and symbiosis between the supernatural and physical realm, which also extends to other non-human components. This bond dictates the cycle and rhythm of life in such indigenous cosmologies as aptly captured below:

Crops die, only to be reborn annually; women shed a portion of their body monthly only to be renewed; the moon sheds its shadow also to be reborn in light each month; human consciousness dies to the light world of day, is reborn to the night world of dream, and then is resurrected to the light world again. And so, it comes really as no surprise that African mythic wisdom holds that human life corresponds to this endless round of nature, measuring life not linearly from birth

to death but cyclically from the world of the living to the world of the ancestors, to the world of the not yet born, to the world of the living again. (*Mythic Wisdom...* 35)

The foregoing submissions are informed by the worldview of the people, and African ethnophilosophy is very much concerned with a worldview as it seeks to interrogate it. For African tragedy, this could be studied by an alert reading of indigenous tragic imaginaries in their context of culture and situation. For it is within such a lens that we can begin to make sense of why cultures see the world differently and also take another look at the motivation for the volunteered death of Olunde in *Death and the King's Horse Man* and the delay or refusal of his father, Elesin Oba, to fulfil his ritual obligation. This will also deepen our understanding of why Clark's *Song of a Goat* elicited a cold reception during its theatrical performance among European audiences who presume that "sexual impotence or sterility were outside the range of tragic dimensions for a European audience" (Soyinka, *Myth* 46). The European audience fails to see the African ethnophilosophy allegorized by the cultural metaphor of the womb portrayed in the play and the sustenance of a bloodline which, in the long run, symbolizes a community that infertility threatens.

The European audience's response is a consequence of their lack of understanding of the Ijaw cultural metaphor as demonstrated by Mr. Pilkings who fails to understand the need for a ritual death sacrifice. Instead, he sees it as barbarism and his attempt at preventing such as bringing light, salvation and modernity to the natives. One of the ways to curb this misunderstanding is through what we propose as the *principle of cultural variability* in analyzing tragedy. This principle states that the concept of tragedy as a phenomenon is universal but particularistic in terms of its form of expression within specific contexts of manifestations. Hence, the cause and what may constitute a tragedy within one context may not be the same in another context.

### **African-Ethnophilosophy and the Yoruba/Ijaw Cosmo-Ontological Imagination of Tragedy in *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Song of a Goat***

Ethnophilosophy is the study of the philosophical systems of indigenous peoples of the world. These philosophical systems are bodies of belief and knowledge that have philosophical relevance. The thrust of ethnophilosophy is, therefore, that every culture can have a philosophy that is unique to it and that may not be comprehensible and applicable to other cultures or all peoples of the world. Perhaps because most ethnophilosophical writings have been focused on Africa, Ivan Karp and Da. A. Masolo, define it as bodies and knowledge associated with African philosophical thought. According to the duo, the fundamental features of ethnophilosophy are "manifested in features of culture such as cosmology and ritual. And these bodies of belief and knowledge find expression in the thoughts and actions of people who share a common culture" (1). It also represents "...the collective worldviews, proverbs, and folklore traditional to a particular culture to define African philosophy" (Ndofirepi, 783).



***African Ethnophilosophical Approach to Yoruba and Ijaw Imagination of Tragedy: Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman and J. P. Clark's Song of a Goat***

The term ethnophilosophy was first used by the Beninese philosopher, Paulin Hountondji, albeit in a pejorative sense but the spread of the term is traceable to Kwame Nkrumah who applied for a Ph.D. thesis on ethnophilosophy (Osha, *Postethnophilosophy* 44; Hountondji, *Companion* 532). The most immediate African antecedents and pioneer works on African ethnophilosophy were Sedar Senghor's philosophy of "Negritude" and the writings of Placid Tempels, Alex Kagame, John Mbiti and others most of whom were regarded as Tempels' disciples. While Senghor underlined the black ontology in his Negritude philosophy, Tempels and his disciples observed a unified Congo philosophy whose fundamental categories manifest in the "features of language such as grammar, or features of culture such as cosmology and ritual" (Karp and Masolo 1; Afolayan and Falola, *African Philosophy* 8; *Identity* 46) while Kagame underscored the worldview of Rwandans by analyzing the linguistic dimension of the Banyarwanda people who speak Kinyarwanda (Hountondji, *Myth and Reality* 20).

Hountondji criticizes the "intellectual complicity" of African scholars who project African ethnophilosophy as an offspring of Western engagement and discourse on Africa from some exotic worldviews (Hountondji, *Knowledge by Africans*, 125). He rejects the monolithic worldview of African ethnophilosophers (like Tempels, Senghor, Kagame) as their view is patronizing and also "an extroverted discourse and, strictly speaking, an "alienated literature" (Hountondji, *Myth and Reality* xviii-171). Hountondji's view calls for caution as African ethnophilosophy may be deployed as a tool for "imperial practice of exoticizing and othering of African modes of thought established within the colonial apparatus of power" where the African culture is comparatively represented as 'primitive culture' (Hountondji, *Myth and Reality* 44; and Wilhelm *Primitive Cultures*, 72). A setback with Hountondji's view is that it overlooks the possibilities of re-galvanising ethnophilosophy as a critical tool to deepen the understanding of the African system of thought and worldview (Gbadegesin 15). In the same vein, he fails to envision how the African ethnophilosophical approach could deepen the conversation on decolonization, cultural assertion, indigenous African traditions, cosmologies, and worldviews. This is the African worldview infused into African ethnophilosophy as an "evaluative parameter for engaging African belief systems" (Afolayan and Folala, *Rethinking...* 9). This is demonstrated in the efforts of African scholars like Chinua Achebe, Soyinka, Ben Okri, Elechi Amadi, Ngugi wa Thiongo, and Okot P' Bitek who have appropriated ethnophilosophical concepts such as indigenous systems of thought in their works. What this suggests is that ethnophilosophy could serve as a tool for cultural decolonization as partly expressed by Osha thus:

ethnophilosophy in the wave of decolonization might, in some respects, have aided nationalist agitations and postcolonial ideologies of liberation that gave rise to counter-discourses to colonialism and the master discourses that promoted it, through which modern African thought gained its different discursive orientations, momentum, and stability. (41)

This brief foray serves as a theoretical background to this study. It is worthy of note that scholarly discussions on African ethnophilosophy have not given critical attention to interrogating the African worldview on tragedy even though what constitutes tragedy is informed to a large extent by the worldview of a people. Soyinka and Clark have drawn from these specific traditional beliefs where the worldviews constitute the affective grounds and catalysts for the tragic experience they represented in their works. This informs their fabulation of the indigenous tragic spirit when the connection with the ancestors is severed, the motivation for voluntary death, the cause of trans-generational curses within a bloodline and the portrayal of the supernatural as

motifs in the two texts under study in this essay. Thus, the African ethnophilosophy framework is here engaged as a hermeneutic tool for the re-assessment of the indigenous weltanschauung which locates tragedy in a culturally specific context. Soyinka and Clark do not call their approach to tragedy ethnophilosophy, yet, we are not in doubt that the cultural specificity of their Yoruba and Ijaw worldview on the tragedy which they communicated through their plays' thematic rendering of ancestors, bloodline, and cosmic harmony expands and pushes the frontiers of scholarly imagination of tragedy intersected with African ethnophilosophy. Even as Soyinka underscores the fact that "the persistent search for the meaning of tragedy, for a re-definition in terms of cultural or private experience is, at the least, [the African] man's recognition of certain areas of depth-experience which are not satisfactorily explained by general aesthetic theories ("Fourth Stage" 364).

### ***Death and the King's Horseman***

*Death and the King's Horseman* is Wole Soyinka's version of the play "*Death and the District Officer*" (Topper 53). On the surface reading, the text may appear as only projecting the clichéd theme of culture clash, but on a deeper level, it offers an understanding of the Yoruba cosmic universe and the representation of tragedy through a carefully crafted plot built around the subject of ritual self-sacrifice and the near de-sacralization of this tradition during the passing away of an Oba. This sacrifice was made by Olunde in the stead of his father Elesin Oba, at Oyo in western Nigeria during the British colonial administration. *Death and the King's Horseman* is not the only work of Wole Soyinka that captures Yoruba Cosmo-ontological imagination of tragedy. Another text which captures his tragic oeuvre is the play *Camwood on the Leaves*. In this play, James Gibbs argues, the Yoruba cosmo-ontology informs Soyinka's aesthetics and his conceptualization of tragedy to foreground:

the self-apprehension of his people on the eve of independence. At a period of transition from colonialism, it was appropriate that he should provide a 'rite of passage' which implied a contrast between his society and the cultural traditions of the imperial power which had ruled it, which had endeavoured to impose values on it, and which had often denied the claim of Africans to such concepts as tragedy. ("Independence play" 62)

The cultural sacredness of the voluntary sacrificial death ritual we observe in *Death and the King's Horseman* is misunderstood by the Pilkings who do not have respect for it as evident in Olunde's reply to the wife of Mr. Pilkings: "You forget that I have now spent four years among your people. I discovered that you have no respect for what you do not understand" (*Horseman* 50). The reason for this misunderstanding or disrespect is because of the pejorative connotations the Pilkings perceive of such a ritual. Being agents of a different civilization, Mr. Pilkings' effort is motivated by the assumption that he represents an enlightened civilization.

The Pilkings, though colonial officers, by implication, cultural ambassadors of the British Empire are repudiated by the culture of voluntary sacrifice. Sadly, their involvement in detaining Elesin Oba by locking him up overtly allegorizes the British necro-power which Mr. Pilkings



***African Ethnophilosophical Approach to Yoruba and Ijaw Imagination of Tragedy: Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman and J. P. Clark's Song of a Goat***

semiotizes, while the British Imperial attempt to legislate on what it may perceive as permissible and non-permissible cultural practices are a flagrant display of power and a total disregard of the African worldview.

It is our belief that this action of the imperialist agents would have triggered the first tragedy had Olunde not intervened by substituting himself in the sacrificial ritual. Failure to fulfil this religio-cultural obligation would have been apocalyptic to the Oyo nation. In the absence of his father held hostage by the Pilkings, Olunde had to undertake the ritual journey to the transcendental realm in order to announce to the ancestors the imminent arrival of the late Oba as culture demands. Olunde, unlike Mr. Pilkings, understands this as a call to duty, a patriotic act of marking an apotheosis of love for one's culture, family name, and community.

Yet, there is a tragic implication to the young man's action. His youthful age makes his sacrificial death a kind of waste given that the gods want the old and not the young. In the words of Iyaloja "the gods demanded only the old and expired plantain [Elesin Oba]" (Soyinka *Horseman* 76), but the unwillingness of the old and expired plantain made the "sap-laden soot [Olunde]" (Soyinka, *Horseman* 76) to go in the plantain's stead. The outcome is that the world is tumbling as shown below:

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 us floundering in a blind future. Your heir has taken the burden on himself. What the end will be, we are not gods to tell. 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, Elesin. (75)

There is, however, a suggestion in Iyaloja's comment above that humans cannot tell whether or not the gods will accept Olunde as a substitute for his father. If Olunde's substitutive sacrifice is rejected by the inhabitants of the transcendental world, a slit would have been created in the traditional Oyo folks' relationship with their gods and in the very foundation of their cosmological existence. Deepening this rupture would be the loss of the one who represents the physical hope for continuity in the cultural enterprise. This rupture is perhaps responsible for Ryan Topper's counter-discourse regarding the implications of the play's events and the intentions of Soyinka in writing the play.

In a study he describes as his political and metaphysical interpretation of *Death and the King's Horseman*, Topper suggests that by theorizing the trauma of colonialism in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Soyinka involved himself in "bio-political theology" (55). This perception which, according to Topper, derives from Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics and his own rereading of *Myth*, leads him to interpret the events of *Death and the King's Horseman* as Soyinka's prefiguration of postcolonial modernity. Topper argues that rather than merely exploring the common idea of culture clash between Europe and Africa, Soyinka in *Death and the King's Horseman* is dramatizing a transition from the sacralised primitive culture of human ritual sacrifice into the desacralized culture of European modernity. In his words, "Deeper than a culture clash, Soyinka articulates a metaphysical transition in which the sacred is transfigured, paradoxically, into a collective experience of desacralization. In short, the desacralization of

Yoruba cosmology functions within *Horseman* as the sacrificial and sacralized foundation of colonial modernity: de(re)sacralization” (55). To Topper, therefore, Elesin is used by Soyinka to exterminate the age-long tradition such that as a vehicle of the transition, Elesin mediates between the sacred and the secular rather than between the world of the living and the dead as most critics tend to argue.

In what seems like a support to the Topperean view, Quayson notices in the play a deliberate act of reversals which appears to be aimed at diminishing the lofty status of the horseman role and, of course, the sacredness of the ritual. First, Quayson observes that "not a single oriki is invoked to highlight [Elesin's] skills as a military commander" in spite of the fact that he is the "guardian of the king's stable" and as such the "commander of the king's army"; second, the same Elesin who started off, ebulliently gradually slides into a womanizing weakling who prostrates before a woman (for instance his sister-in-law); third, in contrast to that earlier sung by Praise-Singer preparatory to the expected ritual of self-sacrifice, a reversed *oriki* is sung for Elesin by Iyaloja after he fails to do the needful and this by appropriating the demeaning imagery of weak animals (157-158). Fourth, Mr. Pilkings' "appropriation of the egungun masks to make an impression at the Residency gala arranged to welcome the visiting Prince from England" which symbolises the use of the sacred for the purpose of entertainment and jest.

If the Topperean counter-discourse was anything to go by, Soyinka's introduction of Olunde's redemptive sacrifice would be a mere smokescreen rather than a means of maintaining the sanctity of the sacred tradition of the Oyo people. It would also mean that Iyaloja's relinquishing of her prospective daughter-in-law to Elesin is not a means of ensuring the success of the ritual, but Soyinka's way of annihilating the ancient ritual in favour of British modernity. However, such a postcolonial or modernist discourse depicts neither a careful understanding of the historical events that inspired the play in the first place nor the value and potency of the religious-cultural practice that the play enunciates. Topper seems to have deliberately ignored the nuances of assimilative wisdom and irreducible metaphysics of the African ritual so ably re-enforced in the play through Olunde's suicide. Though happening at the wrong time, Olunde's substitutive suicide ensures that the suicidal ritual tradition of the Yoruba community of Oyo is not after all destroyed by the colonial powers. At best, it is threatened by the failure of its incumbent life wire to preserve it and, of course, the tragic effect of that failure on the people (in spite of the ameliorating action of his heir) can hardly be ignored. Certain propitiatory rites may be required to appease the gods and so ensure their acceptance of Olunde whom the strange circumstances of his father's failure forcefully bestowed the responsibility on. One is almost sure that the gods will rather accept him than have the age-long ritual of such cosmological magnitude be destroyed by strangers who lack knowledge of its very essence. Moreover, Olunde is not just any man, he is the next horseman after his father; he simply assumed his ordained responsibility earlier than required due to circumstances beyond his control – circumstances which, it could be argued, have moved the hands of the gods who divested the incumbent of his powers and vested it on his heir. Olunde is thus the community's hero for rescuing it from an impending catastrophe of a transcendental magnitude. His action also reduces the impact of his father's failure on the people. The hope for the ritual's continuity which could have been lost with the demise of the heir-less

Olunde is kept alive in the foetus that is safely growing in the womb of the maiden earlier appropriated by Elesin. Hence, the traditional ritual is intact even though the effect of Elesin's embarrassment to the living is likely to linger for a while. The play is, therefore, a tragedy not because Olunde and his father died, for they were destined to as incumbent and successor horsemen, but because of the rupture in the sacred time of the indigenous people's ontological ritual performance, a situation which may require some expiatory rites and sacrifices to the gods and ancestors to normalize.

Worthy of mention also is that what weakens Elesin Oba's commitment to the sacrificial death could be termed as the elevation of the self above the community. Elesin's decision removes him from the social contract that every horseman has with the king and community. This crystallizes as a phantasmagorical attachment to the avarice and allures of life's desires described as "a weight of longing on my earth-held limbs" which made him rescind his obligation even on the verge of sacrifice. We see this in his complaint and regret:

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. . . I confess to you, daughter, 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. I would have shaken it off, already my foot had begun to lift but then, the white ghost entered and all was defiled. (65)

It is indeed the way of humans to blame others for their own failures. In the above, Elesin Oba is being truly human but his aspersions are not to be taken seriously for the gods are not to blame, neither are the people nor the imperial agents fully to blame. The bulk of the blame rests on him for stretching the privileges of his office beyond its limits. It is traditional for the king's horseman who is to pay the ultimate prize to be treated with utmost delicacy and a high degree of indulgence, hence Iyaloja's acquiescence to Elesin's demand for her affianced daughter-in-law even though that singular act of honour proved to be a costly mistake. Quayson even believes that Elesin was deliberate in his refusal to take on the traditional role of the *pharmakos*. His constant interruption of the official process to his ritual suicide is, according to Quayson, a sign of his reluctance and unpreparedness to undertake the role, worse of all, that "shocking request to have the young girl married to him on the very day he is supposed to be undertaking ritual suicide" (157). Therefore, Quayson avers that Elesin's "hedonism, selfishness, and frivolousness" which "exist independently of British interference," account more for his failure than any other act of interference or distraction. He merely capitalized on strange opportunities to escape the ritual suicide, the critic insists, thereby rupturing "the tribe's ancient tradition" (160-162).

By desiring the young woman, who is already betrothed to Iyaloja's son, Elesin pushes his community and Iyaloja into an ethical conundrum. If Iyaloja had refused Elesin Oba from having his wish fulfilled, it would have given Elesin an excuse for declining the ritual sacrifice. Not only that, Elesin Oba's demand places Iyaloja at a cross-road between the individual interest of her

son and the collective interest of the people. Iyaloja demonstrates a great sense of nobility of spirit by placing the community above her son's rights. This is because of her understanding of the importance of what Elesin's sacrifice portends for the entire community. It sustains the vital link, essence and mutual coexistence between the living and the dead. Ritual sacrifices of this nature, according to Masolo, entail a "creation of the movement of forces in a circuit composed of the officiating personality, the sacrificial victim, the altar, and the invoked power" (76). It also reinvigorates the rapport with other beings and vital forces. This rapport is a continuum between the ancestral beings, spirits and the living dead, that is, those who have died but roam the land of the living before transiting to the realm of the supernatural. Thus, Iyaloja seeks to avert a tragedy by acquiescing to Elesin's demand. As Quayson observes, "Iyaloja is prepared to suspend the foundational ethics of familial relationships in favour of the equally substantial claim of communal security and cultural survival" (136).

As already hinted at, Mr. Pilkings plays a role in the tragic fabulation in *Death and the King's Horseman*. Inserting Mr. Pilkings into the play is a technique of disambiguation that Soyinka deploys to show how colonial involvement in the cultural affairs of Africa portends more harm than good. For Mr. Pilkings, a cultural practice which requires a death ritual is one of the many wrong things the British empire must correct among the so-called primitive Blacks. Mr. Pilkings is thus a symbol of the colonial power and its misinterpretations of native customs that we see more amply encapsulated in the character of Mr. Winterbottom in Achebe's *Arrow of God*.

What can we learn from the entire animated events in *Death and the King's Horseman*? We stress that through the ritual events of *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka presents his reader with an African cultural mosaic with specific reference to the Yoruba indigenous cosmology of life and death and the link between the living, the dead and the unborn. The vital force in this link is sustained through sacrifices to ensure that the ancestors are in good disposition toward the living or are reconciled with the living in the case of sin, offence or violation of cultural norms and ethos. Such sacrifices could be in varied forms even though the type portrayed in *Death and the King's Horseman* requires a human being as epitomized by Olunde's suicide. The manner Soyinka portrays Olunde's sacrifice serves as a medium for the double cultural articulation of reconciliation and the securing of blessings. As a reconciliatory act, it is expected to placate the ancestors and gods whose original demand is disobeyed by Elesin Oba. As a medium of securing blessings, it seeks the goodwill of the ancestors and the role of the Yoruba Oba or chief in bridging the liminal space between the living and the departed. In such an indigenous culture, a chief represents the ancestors and must be honoured or deified. Wilhelm Dupré aptly captures how chiefs are perceived in such indigenous cultures:

As a representative of the ancestors, the chieftain is not only physically responsible for the prosperity of his community but often he is also worshipped as a demigod. Many rituals (among them ritual murder or human sacrifice) were connected with the idea of the chieftain, especially when it developed into the idea of sacred kingship, where the position of the king was surrounded by endless rules and taboos and an institutional priesthood. (*Primitive* 72)

The voluntary ritual sacrificial death inserted into the play by Soyinka serves as a poetics of cultural resistance against colonial framings of African culture as barbaric and primitive. Interestingly, this is through the instrumentality of tragedy. The play thus captures the Yoruba “historical moment of tragedy, those moments of large historical conflict in which new forms of thought and action are struggling relentlessly with the old” (Scott “Prologue” 12). The historicity of the play is crucial as it alludes to the demands for independence among many African nations at that time and a search for a new indigenous modernity for Africa, which was arrested by colonialism. Thus, the play is revolutionary in its presentation of the conflict between Mr. Pilkings and the Oyo Empire, as it allegorizes the conflict of ethnophilosophies and empires because Olunde’s act of voluntary death dismantles the grip of colonial indoctrination and serves an anticolonial stance against British ethnophilosophy.

As a British-trained medical doctor, Olunde is expected to view his Yoruba culture from the prisms of ethics and morality. He is supposed to consider the culture of ritual suicide as barbaric and as such helped the British to abolish rather than uphold it, for as his father had lamented, “You [Mr Pilkings] stole from me my firstborn, sent him to your country so you could turn him into something in your image. Did you plan it all beforehand?” (62-63). Ironically, Olunde aligns with his cultural worldview. Olunde’s action signifies defiance and resistance against colonial hegemony, cultural codes, and imposition. It inaugurates an anticolonial stance against the cultural violence and brutality that British colonialism has wrought on the Oyo people as:

these were moments not merely of transition, but moments when great historical forces were at irreconcilable odds with each other, in which the tensions between competing historical directions were at a particularly high pitch, and in which new kinds of subjects (James would have said new kinds of “personalities”) were being thrown upon the historical stage, individuals embodying within their single selves the mighty conundrums and divisions of their age. (“Prologue” 12)

The above gives credence to the assertion that “*Death and the King's Horseman* represents an attempt to confront on a creative level the arrogance of cultural chauvinism of western imperialism” (Williams 72). It also embodies a radical socio-political vision for the postcolonial future of an indigenous community (that is Oyo), a space under British authority. Elesin’s arrest by Mr. Pilkings suggests an imperialist intervention in the affairs of the Oyo community which signals colonial presence and the arrest of indigenous systems of thought. It foregrounds how colonial power inserts itself into the narrative of indigenous people and denounces indigenous culture (ritual death) as barbaric.

Thirdly, in a Yoruba worldview, sacrificial death has a socio-metaphysical function. It can avert a tragedy unless there is no one to voluntarily die as the King’s Horseman. Importantly, we must appreciate Soyinka for his creative manoeuvre in terms of offering salvation amidst a tragic atmosphere. Soyinka implants into the charged atmosphere of a looming tragedy in the play, a new vision and seed of renewal for the colonized Oyo Empire. This is a prospect of rebirth and incarnation of bloodline through the possible birth of a child. The means through which Soyinka offers this redemption is quite subtle. This is through an act which betrays the normative ethics of that same community - the human seed formulated through the momentary pleasure of Elesin Oba with the young maiden he requested, who was betrothed to Iyaloja’s son. Even Iyaloja echoes this salvation in the child which is to come from the sexual intercourse between Elesin



Oba and the maiden by stating thus, “Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn” (*Death and the King’s Horseman* 76). This is why *Death and the King’s Horseman* represents,

on the one hand, the cosmological trauma of colonization, but also conjures a vision of life arising through, yet positing a beyond of, this collective experience. Soyinka’s writing fuses the literary and the sacred, pointing an audience sacrificially severed from sacrificial mediation toward a future birthed on the altar of such a process. In response to the capture of African life itself under the sovereignty of the European—and now African—the nation-state, Soyinka compels us to ask, *what form of collective life may arise through this death?* (Topper 75)

### ***Song of a Goat***

Clark’s *Song of a Goat* offers an understanding of the Ijaw cosmic universe through a very dense but brief plot organized around the subject of a family curse which manifests as impotence in Zifa, the family head. It demonstrates some of the elements of tragedy as described by David Scott thus:

tragedy sets before us the image of a man or woman obliged to act in a world in which values are unstable and ambiguous. And consequently, for tragedy, the relation between past, present, and future is never a Romantic one in which history rides a triumphant and seamlessly progressive rhythm, but a broken series of paradoxes and reversals in which human action is ever open to unaccountable contingencies— and luck. (13)

The complications in the plot crystallize as incest between the same man’s wife, Ebieré, and younger brother, Tonye, and climaxes with the suicides of both brothers with one (Tonye) hanging himself and the other (Zifa) walking into the sea. At the first reading of the text, it would seem, as noted by Isidore Okpewho, that central to this drama is the counter-play of impotence and fertility (“Anxiety of Empire” 55) woven around Ebieré’s inability to ‘womb’ a baby. Okpewho’s observation is crucial as it pushes for an alert reading of the text in order to unveil other layers of meaning not explicitly stated but deducible from the duo’s experience. Ebieré’s predicament is contrapuntal to Zifa’s impotence where Zifa’s condition speaks of cosmic disruption, and Ebieré’s situation speaks of the agony of a victim or one who suffers the outcome of a curse triggered by her husband. Hence, Ebieré is faced with the pressure of validating her uteral capital, since “An empty house... is a thing/Of danger” (*Song of a Goat* 3).

Ebieré’s situation is made worse because her culture valorizes and offers special honour to women who are able to give birth to many children and treats the barren with disdain as their lot belongs to the evil grove. According to the character herself, “... custom dictates those who die childless/Be cast out of the company of the fruitful whose/Special grace is interment in the township” (*Song of a Goat* 25). This may be the reason Ebieré seduces Tonye into an illicit affair,

an act Orukorere acknowledges as "... a betrayal of our race" an abomination which only "the gods and the dead may separate" (*Song of a Goat* 28). For Ebiere, becoming pregnant again and adding another child to the one she already has, would consolidate her status as a wife and mother and take away the social stigma accompanying a woman in her state. The level of shame this brings to her is such that she prefers death to it, hence, "Oh, how I wish I'd die, to end all/This shame..." (*Song of a Goat* 4). On the other hand, her predicament is wearisome, for it is not as if Ebiere is not fertile, the problem lies with her husband, for he lacks "the miracle to bring forth green leaves and fruits" (*Song of a Goat* 4). Ebiere's inability to conceive due to Zifa's impotence only heightens the tension in the text.

Within the Ijaw worldview, Zifa's impotence portends a catastrophe as it threatens his bloodline and ego. Whatever threatens the bloodline within this worldview is seen as an invitation for tragedy. Also, it was not as if Zifa was childless or that Ebiere was barren as they have a child, Dode; it is just that the success of a family in the African context, is primarily measured by the number of offspring it has. Thus, it is a thing of pride to have as many of them as possible. For the European audience, this may not be an issue. It is, thus, understandable why Zifa and wife feel unfulfilled in spite of the presence of Dode, their existing child. They need more children. Zifa's case is, however, not the worst in their Ijaw community because in the Ijaw ethnophilosophy not bearing a child at all is seen as a curse, as in the case of Ogun, another individual mentioned in the play (*Song of a Goat* 8-9). But the tragedy is set in motion by Zifa's disobedience and is made worse by his desire for more children. Such a culture-specific scenario serves as material for understanding what Raymond Geuss sees as an "insight into the fundamental human condition perhaps into the very nature of reality" ("Introduction" xviii). Zifa's predicament is a cursed condition by the gods, a consequence of his disregard for the cultural taboo of burying his late father's leprous body where it ought not to be buried, thereby violating a cosmic order within the Ijaw cosmo-ontology. Zifa knows the spiritual aetiology of his impotence as he seeks ways of breaking the curse. According to him:

I have been to all experts between swamp and Sand. What has any of the lot been able to do but suggest I adjust myself to my curse? Curse! My father who they dared Not spit at when he lived is dead and lying in the evil grove. Was that not enough penalty? Of course, I have recalled Him into town so at times of festival he can Have sacrifice. (*Song of a Goat* 9)

One of the ways Zifa could adjust himself to his curse is to make his wife, Ebiere, "over to another in his family" (*Song of a Goat* 5) to ensure continued procreation according to tradition. Masseur suggests another to "take over the tilling of the fertile soil", but Zifa refuses not because it is a taboo but because his ego will not let him come to terms with it. Such suggestion by Masseur is not alien to indigenous communities in Africa but appears disdainful and scornful to Zifa because he fears others will trample on his ego if they come to know of his impotence. In his words:

...People  
will only be too pleased to pick at me  
As birds at worm squirming in the mud. What,  
Shall I show myself a pond drained dry  
Of water, so their laughter will crack up the floor  
Of my being? (*Song of a Goat* 6)

We should also remember that this same ego of Zifa's made him bring home his tainted father's body too early and buries him among freemen against customs and tradition. His father was a leper, and specific cultural rites must be performed if he must be buried in the community. It is noteworthy that Masseur calls his attention to it, but he treats it with levity:

...You did what every  
 Dutiful son would do when you brought  
 Him back home among his people.  
 [But] It may have been a little bit early  
 For one who died of the white taint. (*Song of a Goat* 10)

There are two ways to explain the tragic spirit in the play. The first way is to identify the motivation behind Zifa's violation of cultural norms and refusal to make his wife over to another male member of his family. Zifa is motivated by his love for his wife, care for his family and a sense of pride to offer his father a befitting burial because of the spiritual implication of ensuring that he constantly offers sacrifices at his grave in his community and not at the evil grove. Ironically, the attempt by this good man to do good through a proper burial rite and to honour his wife's body by not agreeing to Masseur's suggestions, brings him into conflict with the taboos and cosmic order in his community. Hence, the curse-induced tragedy in *Song of a Goat* can be aetiologically traced to the nature of the conflict between Zifa and the gods. Clark's handling of the outcome of the curse and conflict in terms of impotence, incest, and suicide serve as props to the conceptualization of the Promethean existence of life within Ijaw's ethnography. And Zifa's self-help handling of the issues only escalated the ominous tragedy.

The second way is to look at the presuppositions of Zifa's actions within the Ijaw ethnophilosophy. Zifa's actions circumvent the indigenous customs and traditions of his community. He disregards that which holds the community together, its social equilibrium and what may be termed as its sense of authority, hence a curse on him as punishment from the gods and ancestors. This is a social contract of obligation and obeisance to the spirit realm, ancestors, and the entire community. Sadly, even Zifa's father who has joined the ancestors and for whom Zifa went through the pain of offering a burial rite as a cultural obligation, could not prevent the curse upon him. The tragedy is instigated by Zifa's defiance to the culture of life, spiritual obligation and the consequences of violating them. Hence, he is prey to the harsh punishment of the gods whose presence pervades the play in consonance with Amadi's prescription for the African tragedian. In "Gods and Tragic Heroes," Amadi recommends an Afrocentric tragic aesthetics as an alternative to the Euro-western model in which the role of supernatural beings is underplayed. The Afrocentric model must emphasise the role of supernatural elements whom Amadi believes are overwhelmingly critical to what happens to the tragic hero and how that pans out at the end. In tune with Amadi's prescription and as tragic protagonists in African ritual dramas, Elesin's life is, for instance, intertwined with the transcendental world of the gods and ancestors; likewise, Amadi's Isiburu finds himself entwined in a conflict with Amadioha, the Ikwerre god of thunder. Similarly, Clark's Zifa is embroiled in a conflict with the gods of

***African Ethnophilosophical Approach to Yoruba and Ijaw Imagination of Tragedy: Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman and J. P. Clark's Song of a Goat***

Deinogbo who have punished him with impotence. All through the play, Zifa, like Odewale in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, struggles under the heavy weight of the god's decision against him, but the difference is that while the former's hinges on predestination, the latter's is a reaction to a wrong done the gods. In both, however, the gods are not to blame. The gods are only to blame in the Greek prototype of Rotimi's adaptation – *Oedipus Rex* – because of the absence in its informing European worldview, the cosmic unity or harmony among all beings that characterizes the African world. Zifa like Elesin is to blame for his role in the tragedy of *Song of a Goat*. Unlike any European counterpart of his, Zifa is not ignorant of the consequences of such a heinous offence against the gods and people of Deinogbo as he commits, so his action is regarded by the gods as an affront, hence their irreversible punishment to him. Ironically, the only option open to him for a partial redemption is to make his wife over to another potent member of his family, an option which he never accepts and on which the play's multiple tragedies hinge.

The pervasive presence of the gods in the plot is aimed at emphasizing their significance to the tragic import of the play, and because of the Zifa's affront to them, the gods maintain sustained surveillance on him throughout the play. In what the ordinary citizens of Deinogbo consider as her usual strange but meaningless alcoholic blabbing, Orukorere warns of the gods strangling grip on Zifa:

ORUKORERE: There goes the cry again! I am sure  
A leopard has the poor thing in his grip.  
We must save the poor brute. (15)

Earlier, the same woman had invited neighbours to come to the goat's rescue:

ORUKORERE: All you people run this way!...  
I say come out here, all you people...  
A goat, a goat, I hear the cry of a goat...  
A goat, a he-goat, don't you hear  
Him crying? Wo-oo-oo-oo!  
Will you come out all you people?

The contrasting animal imagery deployed by Clark to designate the gods and Zifa reveals the extremity of the difference in their powers. Zifa the powerless goat is not a match to the powerful gods (leopard), hence his inability to extricate himself from its grip. Endowed as an adult with the realities of this disparity and, indeed, the dictates of the indigenous culture of which he is a member, it becomes surprising why Zifa makes himself a prey to such inviolable beings. By a personal act of wrong-doing, Zifa is facing a repercussion, but by being a member of an indigenous African society, the entire community must share in his predicament. Here lies the significance of Orukorere's summoning of neighbours in the above excerpt and, indeed, their presence at the last scene of Zifa and Tonye's death and Ebierere's fainting.

As in *Death and the King's Horseman* where Soyinka foreshadows the tragedy of the play using the visionary Praise-singer in that first dialogic *oriki* sung for Elesin, Clark foreshadows the tragedy of *Song of a Goat* using Orukorere the seer:

ORUKORERE: I must find him, the he-goat;

His cry is everywhere, don't you hear it?  
 It is all over the house: I say, can't  
 You hear the poor billy bleating.  
 It's bleeding to death.

Indeed, Zifa's life gradually deteriorates with the weight of the curse on him until his eventual death in a fashion and circumstance similar to Elesin's. Like Elesin, Zifa takes his own life out of shame arising from a younger family member's taking over of his role; and like Elesin, Zifa's death is by suicide preceded by a lamentation in which, like Elesin, he recounts his failures. However, Zifa, unlike Elesin, takes responsibility rather than blame another:

ZIFA: The poor, brave boy has truly done for me  
 Good people, I hope you understand. It  
 Is not that I desired to drink out  
 Of his scalp which is unnatural, but that boy,  
 He went in to my wife, my wife who  
 Although under my roof for five years  
 I could not possess, for you see  
 I am powerless between my thighs. Was  
 That not a brotherly act? He sought to keep  
 What his brother was powerless to keep  
 In the house. My house, it has collapsed  
 In season that is calm to others. My fathers  
 Built it before my time that my children  
 And theirs to come may find roof above  
 Their heads. And now what have I done  
 With it? In my hands it falls into a state  
 Of disrepair and now is fallen,  
 Fallen. Nothing stands; I will go  
 And find a new place to rest. (40-41)

This final calamity that befalls Zifa's house could have been avoided as Clark shows how the culture provides an escape from such through the appropriate sacrifice via Orukorere who wants to cleanse the family from the ominous curse that the tragic flaws of Tonye, Ebiere and Zifa instigated. This philosophy also reflects the symbolic place of the eldest in the family as Zifa is expected to spearhead the proceedings. His refusal to perform the cleansing rituals heightens the same flaw of stubbornness that set in motion the spiraling chain of tragic circumstances in the play from his impotence to Tonye's incestuous act with Ebiere to Tonye's suicide and then to the climax of Zifa's own drowning in the nearby sea. As a result, Zifa's aunt, Orukorere, and wife, Ebiere, are left in agony. Using dark imagery, Orukorere bemoans this tragedy of the house of Zifa, noting that "there will never be light again in this House, child, this is the night of our race, the fall of all that ever reared up head or crest" (*Song of a Goat* 42). But, Orukorere is wrong and the cause of this hyperbolic misrepresentation is not farfetched; it is grief. Orukorere is wrong



***African Ethnophilosophical Approach to Yoruba and Ijaw Imagination of Tragedy: Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman and J. P. Clark's Song of a Goat***

because Dode lives on as a male member of Zifa's house and, of course, the one to carry on the family name to the next generation. Beyond Dode is also the "unborn" growing in the womb of Ebiere out of that ill-fated affair between her and Tonye. That seed eventually becomes the tragic protagonist of *The Masquerade*, the sequel to *Song of a Goat* and second in Clark's first trilogy that ends with *The Raft*.

Insight into the aetiology of an individual's existential crises and how to curb them are important lessons that *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Song of a Goat* offer humanity. They are captured as metaphors, allusions and even dialectics of the two indigenous cosmologies (Yoruba and Ijaw) manifest in their speculative thoughts. And the plays dismiss the assumption that such speculative thoughts belong to or originate from the Greeks, and by extension, the West alone. Hence, every culture has a speculative capacity in its ethnophilosophy.

Our discussion poses a concern about what makes for tragedy among indigenous cosmologies in Africa within an African ethnophilosophical purview. Our answer is simple and also not absolute. It is simply the karmic consequences of avoidable human actions, perpetuated nonetheless, which violate the norms, ethical codes and principles that sustain the harmony between the spiritual and the physical within the semantic universe which circumscribes a culture-specific context of emergence. Such tragedy can be triggered by a male or female, rich or poor, with an individual, communal and national magnitude and focus. These tragic consequences continue until the circle is broken through propitiatory actions.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have pointed out the Greek origin of the euro-western concept of tragedy. We have also highlighted some of its shortcomings and the modifications that have been made throughout the various epochs of literary history. We have argued that such a template does not wholly fit into the African worldview even though there is a place for mutual borrowing across cultures. Then we have suggested an ethnophilosophical approach to the interpretation of tragedy in indigenous cosmologies in Africa as evident in the two texts. What is the essence of all of this? The essence is to articulate a Yoruba and Ijaw indigenous cosmic interpretation within such that African literary text exegetists can have an option for an approach to choose from that is African in perspectives and orientation - what we have called an African ethnophilosophical framework. Using Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and J. P. Clark's *Song of a Goat*, we have explored the practical manifestations of this African ethnophilosophical approach to the tragic mode as handled by two of Africa's finest dramatists of the first-generation and we insert an anti-colonial tone to the tragic material of Soyinka in *Death and the King's Horseman*.

### **Reference**

- Abrams, Meyer Howard. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, vol. 360. Oxford UP, 1953.
- Afolayan, Adeshina, and Folala, Toyin "Introduction: Rethinking African Philosophy in the Age of Globalization." *The Palgrave handbook of African philosophy*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 1-16.
- Akomolafe, Mohammed Akinola. "Yoruba Ontology: A Critique of the Conceptualization of Life After Death." *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol. 9, no. 6, 2016, pp. 33-53.

- Al-Hakim, Tawfik. "Introduction to King Oedipus." *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Edited by Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson. Blackwell Publishing, 2010, pp. 374-381.
- Amadi, Elechi. "Gods and Tragic Heroes." *Speaking and Singing: Papers and Poems*. U of Port Harcourt P, 2003, pp. 62–9.
- Augusto, Boal. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. London: Pluto Press, 1979.
- Byam, Nina. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Fifth edition, volume W.W. Norton and Company Ltd, 1998.
- Chinaka, Psalms, and Okwudiri Anasiudu. "The Dilemma of Shakespearean Tragedy and Contemporary Nigerian Perspectives." *The Internet Journal of Language, Culture and Society*, vol. 1, no. 44, 2017, pp. 44-4.
- Clark, J. P. "Song of a Goat." *Three Plays*. A Three Crowns Book, 2001, pp. 1-48.
- Dübgén, Franziska and Stefan Skupien. *Paulin Hountondji: African Philosophy as Critical Universalism*. Springer, 2018.
- Dupré, Wilhelm. *Religion in Primitive Cultures, A Study in Ethnophilosophy*. Mouton & Co, 1975.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Criticism and Ideology, A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*. Lowe & Brydone Printers Limited, Thetford, Norfolk, 1976.
- Ford, W. Clyde. *The Hero with an African Face: Mythic Wisdom of Traditional Africa*. Random House Inc., 1999.
- Gbadegesin, Segun. *African Philosophy, Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities*, American University Studies, 1991.
- Geuss, Raymond. *Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, Nietzsche: The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Edited by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Gibbs, James. "The Independence Plays." *Modern Dramatists, Wole Soyinka*. Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1986, pp 54-70.
- Hountondji, Paulin J. *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. Indiana University Press, 1996.
- Hountondji, Paulin J. "Knowledge of Africa, knowledge by Africans: Two perspectives on African studies." *RCCS Annual Review. A selection from the Portuguese journal revista crítica de ciências sociais* 1 (2009).
- Hountondji, Paulin, and Roland Racevskis. "From the ethnosciences to ethnophilosophy: Kwame Nkrumah's thesis project." *Research in African Literatures* 28.4 (1997): 112-120.
- Karp, Ivan and D. A. Masolo. Ethnophilosophy, African, 1998. Doi:10.4324/9780415249126-Z009-1. Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Taylor and Francis, <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/ethnophilosophy-african/v-1>.
- Krutch, Joseph, Wood. "The Tragic Fallacy." *Five Approaches of Literary Criticism: An Arrangement of Contemporary Critical Essays*. Edited by Wilbur S. Scot. Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1974, pp. 129-145.
- Malcolm Heath. Trans. *Poetics by Aristotle*. Penguin Books, 1996.
- Masolo, D. A. *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. Indiana University Press, 1994.

***African Ethnophilosophical Approach to Yoruba and Ijaw Imagination of Tragedy: Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman and J. P. Clark's Song of a Goat***

- Miller, Arthur. "Tragedy and the Common Man." *The New York Times on the Web*. February 27, 1949. [https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/11/12/specials/miller-common.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/11/12/specials/miller-common.html?_r=1&oref=slogin)
- . "Tragedy and the Common Man." *Tragedy: Vision and Form*. 2nd ed. Edited by Roberts. Corrigan. Harper, 1981, pp. 744–6.
- . *Death of a Salesman*. Publishers' Distributors Pty. Ltd., 2005,
- Mudimbe, V. Y. *The Invention of Africa, Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*. Indiana University Press, 1988.
- Muir, Kenneth. "Tragedy." *Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism*. Edited by Martin Coyle et al. Gale Research, 1990, pp. 363–74.
- Ndofirepi, Amasa Philip. "An African Philosophy for Children: Towards a Situated Paradigm." *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 779-793
- Ngwoke, Omeh Obasi. "Experimenting with a new tragic model: Elechi Amadi's *Isiburu*." *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 55(2):39-56 · August 2018, DOI: 10.17159/2309-9070/tvl.v.55i2.4948 Retrieved 24/06/2019 from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327340967\\_Experimenting\\_with\\_a\\_new\\_tragic\\_model\\_Elechi\\_Amadi%27s\\_Isiburu](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327340967_Experimenting_with_a_new_tragic_model_Elechi_Amadi%27s_Isiburu)
- . "The Use of Archetypes in the Drama of J. P. Clark." *Research Journal of Humanities, Legal Studies & International Development*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2020, pp. 58-74.
- Nwabueze, Emeka. *Studies in Dramatic Literature*. Enugu: ABIC BOOKS & Equip. Ltd., 2011.
- Nwahunanya, Chinyere. *Literary Criticism, Critical Theory and Postcolonial African Literature*. Springfield Publishers Ltd., 2012.
- Odoh, Onyeka Emeka. "Towards a Universal Tragic Vision in JP Clark's *Song of a Goat*." *Journal of Literature, Languages and Linguistics*, vol. 32, 2017, pp. 48-57.
- Okpewho, Isidore. "Soyinka, Euripides, and the Anxiety of Empire." *African Drama and Performance*. Edited by John Conteh-Morgan and Tejumola Olaniyan. Indiana University Press, 2004.
- Osha, Sanya. *Postethnophilosophy*. vol. 227. Rodopi, 2011.
- Quayson, Ato. *Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature*. Cambridge UP, 2021.
- Scott, David. *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Duke UP, 2004.
- Sidney, Philip. *A Defence of Poetry*. Oxford U P, 1966.
- Soyinka, Wole. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Syndics of the Cambridge UP, 1976.
- . *Death and the King's Horseman*. Hill and Wang, 1975.
- . "The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Tragedy." *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Edited by Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson. Blackwell Publishing, 2010, pp. 364-374.
- Topper, Ryan. "The Sacrificial Foundation of Modernity in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 50, no.1, 2019, pp. 53-79.
- Udumukwu, Onyemaechi. *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Introduction*. Charles-Matins Higher Education and Consulting Company, 2017.
- Williams, Adebayo. "Ritual and the Political Unconscious: The Case of *Death and the King's Horseman*." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1993, pp. 67-79.
- . Robert R. *Tragedy, Recognition, and the Death of God: Studies in Hegel and Nietzsche*. OUP, 2012.