

Myth in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and a Dance of the Forest.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of myth in Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman and A Dance OF the Forests. It attempts the definitions of myth and submits that in myth, man finds meaning in his existence of the words; the worlds of the past, of the present and of the future. The paper explores the agent of this function as it centers on the elements which serves as vehicles for the fulfillment of myth as a structuring device in the two plays. This paper therefore submits that the aesthetic import of myth in Soyinka's Death and the king's Horseman and A Dance of the Forest indicate its relevance as the foundation of life and a proper formula by which life flows.

Keywords: *Myth, Gods, Aesthetic, Ancestors, Rituals.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Myth is received as revelations of divine powers determining the course of natural events. It accounts for the origin of the world, of mankind, of death and other phenomena, whether of human or of external nature.

In ancient Greek myth explores the activities of gods and heroes, and whole body of the divine and cosmogonic legends.

Suffice it say that the predicaments that confront man, all find exploration in myth.

Malinowski (1967:19) opines that;

Myth explains details of ceremonial ritual and establishes the rationale for events and observances and their historicity.

However, Levi – Strauss (1963:210) argues that;

Myth is language, functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at 'taking off' from the linguistic ground on which it keeps on rolling.

Claude Levi – Strauss as a structuralist and anthropologist treat myth as a signifying system whose true meaning is not its, music its syntax, but as made up of grass constituent units that are also present in language and these are signs which are to be identified and interpreted on the model of language propounded by Ferdinand de Saussure.

In additions and attitudes depends. Myth is regarded as a tool intelligible to himself. Speaking on the usefulness of Myth, Schorer (1960:355) maintains that;

Literature ceases to be perceptual and tends to degenerate into more description without adequate myth; for to cite Malinowski, Myth, continually modified and renewed by the modifications of history is in some form an indispensable ingredient of all culture.

From the above, myth have certain positive contributions to humanistic studies and history. That is to say, myth has certain links and functions in society and these functions spread

across culture y ideas being transmitted from person to person, generation to generation, and so pass on information which relate to universal human adaptation.

Writing on Soyinka, (1973:22) maintains that;

The essential ideas which emerge from a reading of Soyinka's work are not specially Africa ideas although his characters and their mannerism are Similarly Bamikurle (1980:30) argues that;

For Soyinka, the attitude to myth is complex,

Sometimes he preserves (The Bacchaes of Euripides),

Sometimes he questions and reforms (The Strong Breed),

Sometimes he rejects ... and often he explores themes in contemporary life using the frame work of myth

Myth, therefore, as an artistic creation of human imagination, a manifestation of the creative function presents a universality of idea and application that is acceptable to man and society.

Put differently, as this paper is set to examine the use of myth in Soyinka's

A Dance of the Forest and death and the king's Horseman, Soyinka in the two plays under study, using myth to investigate a phenomenon he uses is the idea based on the belief that the dead are not only dead but do come in contact with the living and the unborn and vice versa. For instance, in the two plays, we shall see a fascination with stories in which gods are prominent characters.

This paper shall therefore limit its discussion on some elements of myth – making in the two plays using three categories; the gods the ancestors and ritual.

It is hoped that the above categories will enhance our understanding of myth in Wole Soyinka's A Dance of the Forest and Death and the King's Horseman.

2.0 ELEMENTS OF MYTH - MAKING IN "A DANCE OF THE FOREST" AND "DEATH AAND THE KING'S HORSE"

The discussion of elements of myth-making in Soyinka's plays has been limited to the traditional aspects, for examples the uses of dance and folklore. In this paper, an attempt will be made to consider some mythic elements such as the role of the gods, the significance of the ancestors and the functions of rituals, and how effectively they are employed in the two plays under study to depict Soyinka's use of myth.

2.1 THE ROLE OF THE GODS:

The treatment of the gods in the plays is remarkable. Gods are portrayed in communication with man. They not only control human beings but also interfere in their affairs. This act is indispensable for the realization of what Soyinka describes as "Cosmic totality"

Kuenene (1973:17) opines that;

None that I have read seriously looks into the rich mythological data characterizing many Africa societies. Only Wole Soyinka has perharps depicted the Yoruba gods with any degree of seriousness and relevance.

This assertion goes to demonstrate the degree of involvement of gods in Soyinka's plays. As a mythic element, we shall examine.

How these gods and supernatural forces shape human thought and action, and help enhance the mythical structure of the plays.

In A Dance Of the forest, the gods are into every aspect of human life and relationship. These gods mingle and interfere in the action of the human characters. For

instance, Aroni who is one of the gods tells us that Demoke has been guilty of killing his apprentice oremole.

This shows the level of interaction of the gods and living.

Also, Obaneji who combines as god and man makes the character able to undergo a process of self- recovery. Obaneji leads Rola, Adenebi and Demoke deeper and deeper into the forest bringing them to the judgement of self- recovery, by his exposition; we are able to see the corrupt practices of adenebi, the scandalous love life of Rola and crime of Demoke. It is in recognition of the role of gods to bring man to judgement that Agboreko says”

No doubt it is another cunning thought of Aroni. To let the living condemn themselves (pg, 35).

Thus, Jones (1973: 41) state that”

The use of the gods and spirits, the background plunge into history, as well as the peering into the future with the aid of possessed humans all combine to give the play an archetypal quality and an application broader than any confining parcel of space or time.

So through forest father, the three human offenders have come to grasp with need for their own regeneration by self- condemnation, this achievement is shown when Demoke says:

We three who lived many lives in this one might, have we not done enough? Have we not felt enough for the memory of our remaining lives? (pg: 73).

Thus, having passed through the process of regeneration, we can see that the gods are the embodiment of wisdom and justice in the affairs of men.

The gods are also involved in Death the king’s horseman. They are unseen forces manipulating man. Unlike the former play, here the gods are not seen in their physical manifestation of relationship with the living. Their presence is implied, for example, in the portrayal of Elesin Oba. When he commits a moral offence by desecrating the maiden, he is abandoned by the gods hence; the ritual death which he is supposed to perform is carried out by his own Olunde. In a state of disappointment, he says:

I fingered hidden charms and the contact was damp: there was no spark left to sever the life- strings that should stretch from every fingertip. My will was squelched in the spittle of an alien race, and all because I had committed this blasphemy of thought that there might be the hand of the gods in a stranger’s intervention (p. 21)

Therefore, to appease the gods and return his community to cosmic totality, Olunde takes his own life in fulfillment of social cohesion in the community.

Also, in A Dance of the forests, Ogun and eshuoro are gods linked to men, not only by the fact that they are patrons of Demoke and Oremole respectively, but also by their human- like conduct. In this, the gods play a significant role. The action of Demoke in killing his apprentice is carried with the aid of Ogun. This act precipitates the anger of Eusguoro and then places the two gods in bitter enmity over Demoke. With ogun, his protégé Demoke can do no wrong.

The lion never allows anybody to play with his cub, ogun will never allow his child to be punished.

But Eshuro replies

Demoke, son and son again to pious carvers.

Have you losr fear? Demoke, renegade, beware
The slanted eye of night. Beware this anger of the silent wind that rustles'. Eshuoro,
I'll be revenged, I'll be revenged...(pg. 44)

It is obvious, that the activities of mortals are being modulated from behind by gods and such gods influence them for good or bad.

3.2 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ANCESTORS

Ancestors play a remarkable role in the two plays. As a mythic element the significance of the ancestors is similar to that of the god. They influence human action and help to direct the mythical structure of the plays.

In a "A Dance of the forest", there is the presence of the ancestors. They mingle with the living and the unborn. In the prologue, Aroni, the lame one in order to show the influence of the ancestors says:

I know who the Dead ones are. They are guest of the human community who are neighbors to us of the forest.

They asked us for ancestors, for illustrious ancestors, and I sent two spirits of the restless dead...(p. 5).

This statement shows the degree of affirmity between the dead and the living. The two ancestors, the dead man and his wife, are therefore no accidental case. In previous life they were linked in violence and blood with the living generation.

Rosce (1971:73) maintains that:

The experience of Dead man and his wife is clear enough. It is a case of plus ca change. Men treated each other appallingly in the past: they treat each other appallingly in the present; they will treat each other appallingly in the future.

Thus, the Dead Man says:

Three lives I led since first I went away
But still my first posseses me
The pattern is unchanged (p. 61)

In Death and the king's horseman, the portrayal of the ancestors is shown through the Dead Alafin. Though there is no physical manifestation of the Alafin, his impact is ever felt. In a bid to assert the co-existence between the living and the ancestors, Elesin Oba keeps remanding us of the presence of the Alafin in his life and the need to join him.

Elesin Says;

I have freed myself of earth and now. It's getting dark.
Strange voices guide my feet (P.183).

So there is a unity between the mortals and the immortals in the great world beyond. Also, the dead ancestors influence the living and determine who among the unborn should have contact with the living.

In the words of Iyaloja;

Only the curses of the departed are to be feared.
The claims of one whose foot is on the threshold
Of their abode surpasses even the claims of blood.
It is impiety even to place hindrance in their ways (P.161).

This establishes a communion between the ancestors and the living.

In the same vein, the relevance of the ancestors to the present is shown in *A Dance of the Forests*.

Adenebi has this to say;

We must bring home the descendants of our great forebears. Find them. Find the scattered sons of our proud ancestors. Let us assemble them around the two terms of this nation and we will drink from their resurrected glory (P.31).

Also, the ancestors play a part in the future. The Dead Woman who is pregnant is considered to serve as a link between the past and the unborn. So the dead represented the co-existence of opposites such as mortality and immortality.

2.3 FUNCTIONS OF RITUAL:

In the two plays, there are manifestations of purely dramatic rituals. As a mythic element, the purposes of ritual are varied and could be used in different forms.

According to Wellek and Warren (1956:35); historically, myth follows

and is correlative to ritual, it is “ the spoken part of ritual; the story which the ritual enacts. The ritual is performed for a society by its priestly representative in order to avert or procure; it is an “Agendum” which is recurrently, permanently necessary, like harvests and human fertility, like the initiation of the young into their society’s culture and a proper provision for the future of the dead.

From this, it is clear that myth is embedded in ritual for the well being of the community. Individuals are used for important ritual purposes on behalf of their community. It is, therefore, a form of expiation for the restoration of harmony in human society and in the cosmic world. Also, the goal of ritual is for regeneration.

In *Death and the King’s Horseman*. We shall examine the rite-of-passage ritual in which the hero is expected to bridge the gap between the dead, the living, and the unborn.

Since the king is dead, tradition demand that Elesin must follow him by a ritual to the world beyond.

But Elesin Flinches before the gulf to transition. This failure to fulfill his responsibility will cause a break in the continuity of the community and the preservations of its values.

As a mythic element, the responsibility of dying would have reinforced the people’s faith in life after death. But when he fails, Olunde performs the ritual function of bridging the gulf of transition between the different phases of existence, the world of the dead, the present, and the unborn. By this ritual, Olunde saves the situation which would have been disastrous, and restores the belief of the community. Furthermore, this ritual ensures the continuity of society as it sustains the link covering the dead, the present and the unborn.

This ritual of timelessness of the different phases of existence is also parallel in *A Dance of the Forests*: Here Forest Father begins the ritual of liberating the liberating the pregnant women from a burden which she has borne for eighty years. This is a ritual of exorcism. It drives away the evil in the dead pregnant woman. The function is to show purgation of the restoration of harmony in human society and in cosmic world.

It also establishes the continuity between the past, the present and the future. Through this ritual both goods and men are conscious of what Soyinka calls the “Primeval Severance”. In *Death and the King’s Horseman*, There is a carrier that where the union of Elesin with the new bridge is rural action.

According to Elesin,

Take it. It is no mere virgin stain. But the union of
life and the seeds of passage. **MY** vital flow, the last
from this flesh is intermingled with the promise of the future life, All is prepared.
Listen.... Yes.
It is nearly time (P.180)

This union emphasizes the unity between the present and the future.
It bridges the guilt of transition between the living and the unborn.

In A Dance of the Forest: Agboreko's rite of divination in the Gathering of the tribes" is a carrier of ritual that involves the purgation of his society from moral chaos. It shows a society that requires self-examination.

At the ceremony, Demoke's Totem and the circumstances surrounding its production, manifest a feeling of disappointment by the people.

In addition, the presence of the Dead Man and his wife does not go down well with the people.

Evidently, in this ritual, man and the gods are shown in a timeless context. In the worlds of Agboreko;

If they are the dead and we are the living, then
we are their children. They shan't curse us (P. 37)

So in "The gathering of the tribes". We see a ritual of divination that involves the unity of the present and the dead, that is mortally and immortally. This action implies the continuity of human nature.

3 CONCLUSION

This paper shows the ingenious use of myth created within a context in which the issues of human existence are raised in a peculiarly dramatic way. It articulates how Soyinka not only harnesses myth to explore and account for certain patterns of occurrences in human experiences, but also portrays the vision of man in his relation to nature.

Irele (1988:157) rightly put;

Since man is not a mere category of nature, we cannot
hope to reach a total understanding of his experience
Or his qualification or deductions from external observation.
It is only by using a metaphor that we can equate
the structure of DNA with the "Structure" of a myth.

Therefore, in this paper, the aesthetic import of myth indicates its relevance as the foundation of life and a proper formula by which life flows. In myth man finds meaning in his existence of the worlds, the worlds of the past, of the present, of the future. In order to achieve this, paper explores the agents of this function.

We centered on the elements of myth making: gods, ancestors, and ritual and how these elements serve as vehicles for the fulfillment of myth as a structuring device.

Strictly speaking, myth cannot be overlooked in Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman and A Dance of the forests since it articulates the reasonableness of life.

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