

# Social Functions Of Ritual Suicide In Wole Soyinka's Death And The King's Horseman And The Strong Breed

Olaniyan, Modupe Elizabeth

Department of Theatre and Media Arts, Ekiti State University,  
Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria

**Abstract:** *Ritual is a symbolic act that is specifically particular to a culture and groups of people for specific reason, purpose and function. This purpose may be marked individual (personal) or social, when it involves a group of people. Suicide literarily an act of killing oneself. But Durkheim (1997:51), has defined the concept as 'death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result'. The two plays of Wole Soyinka selected for this study; Death and the King's Horseman and The Strong Breed explain the two typesw of ritual suicide, according to Durkheim and their social functions. These two types of suicide are: (1) One resulting from biological factors such as heredity and racial predisposition. (2) Psychological factor such as the suffering of an individual from an unstable mind.*

*Explaining the first type of suicide, Death and the King's Horseman is used while the second type is explained using The Strong Breed, where the suicide act of the protagonist comes indirectly from the correlate connection of his unstable mind, i.e the dialogue between man's life and his destiny as shaped by the mind.*

**Keywords:** *Ritual, Suicide, Social, Function, Heredity.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Yoruba tribe of the South-Western part of Nigeria, is a tribe nourished and highly blessed in culture and tradition. Her ritual standard is very vast and balance. This study revolves around the Yoruba ritual culture and the influence of the culture in the dramatic and the theatrical world of the people. That ritual influences the creation of the works of art (drama, especially) is not far-fetched as exemplified by the prolific writer, Wole Soyinka. Evidences are found in many of his works like *The Strong Breed*, *Death and the King's Horseman*, *A Dance of the Forest*, *Madman and Specialists*, etc. These plays and many others, present the rituals of the Yoruba people.

Ritual is carrying out a religious action for individual or communal purposes. J.S. Mbiti (2005:100), sees ritual as:

A set form of carrying out a religious action or ceremony. It is a means of communicating something of religious significance through words, symbols and actions.

Ritual is thus performed usually as religious obligations or ideals for the satisfaction of spiritual or emotional need of the practitioner, for the purpose of ensuring social bond, demonstration of respect or submission, obtaining social acceptance, stationing one's affiliation, social or moral education and promotion of peaceful coexistence (Benedict, 2005).

The Yoruba traditional society believes that the environments are controlled by some visible forces which are beyond their understanding. They also have the belief that nothing happens without a reason and that the invisible world controls the physical. These invisible forces at times, may be palpable – rain, earthquake, diseases, thunder, lightening etc. and sometimes, impalpable – fate, luck, and discontinuity of causality. Man thus seeks refuge in order to understand, control and appease these forces.

Ritual may be performed by an individual, a group or by an entire community in arbitrary places or in places specially meant and prepared for such a ritual. It may be performed daily, monthly or annually. Some are seasonal, depending on

the prescription of such a ritual. Ritual has made an ingrained habit of man and a close connection with reverence. Ritual in many cases, expresses reverence for a god or a state of humanity.

Very frequently too, we come across suicide in drama as a crucially potent, though onobstrusively so – aspect of the form. Artistic form acts on our subconsciousness in a far subtler and more surreptitious ways than the usually more obvious content. As a formal element, suicide in drama performs significant functions in the intra-textual development, organization and articulation of the author's artistic and social vision.

A point about suicide in real life and its use in literature is worth noting. While there is much mystery and incomprehension surrounding an act of suicide in actuality, the terrain is far clearer in literature. This is so because in real life, the internalization of experience is unique for every individual and most often, obscure to even the most intimate observer. Motivations to suicide – sought for usually after the act – remain, even with 'explicit' clues, mainly conjectural and foggy. In the literary work however, as a mediation of reality, it is the rule and practice of construction that the determining conditions of characters' experiences are set out and either directly or indirectly, unmistakable. The suicide act here is thus understandable in context.

Central to suicide in Nigerian drama is the concept of honour. This 'honour' is best defined by listing its constituent parts; good reputation, glory, dignity, integrity, pride and nobility of mind. These honorifics are mental in themselves, they acquire particular distinguishing colours only within specific contexts. In other words, the concept 'honour' becomes aristocratic or plebian, backward or progressive, reactionary or revolutionary, only in given contexts of application. Before we determine the particular line(s) of the forms of honour that nourish suicides in a significant body of Nigerian drama, first a conceptual categorization is imperative.

Olaniyan (2003) has categorized suicide into two broad types – Prognostic and Diagnostic suicides respectively. Prognostic suicide according to him, is committed after all predictions of the trend and probable result of a situation unyieldingly commands the individual or group to self-destruct. Prognostic suicide results from a morbid fear of one's honour being soiled, or an irredeemable disgrace being inflicted. Self-destruction in this case becomes, by a most ironic twist, self-love. This suicide is very often generously steeped in the baptismal waters of egotism, defeatism and cross idealism. This is in line with Emile Durkheim's first classification of suicide.

Diagnostic suicide on the other hand, is committed after a proper diagnosis of a harrowing experience already undergone and the results reached, in the circumstance, makes life hardly worth continuing. The crucial suicidal factors in this case are the probable salvation of an already significantly faded pride and dignity, and then outright disillusionment. Diagnostic suicide is committed after the honour of the group or an individual has been soiled leading to psychological imbalance/unstable mind. This is in line with Durkheim second categorization of suicide.

Suffice do say that the word suicide originates from the Latin word 'suicidare', meaning 'to kill oneself'. This is an aspect under sacrificial suicide. It is the highest level of manifestation of ritual sacrifice. Ritual suicide is performed for two main purposes which will be discussed under sociological or social functions of ritual suicide. The two divisions are 'connection and social bound' and 'purgation of evil'. Thus, the two plays selected for this study will be considered in explaining these points as well as the world social view. The study aims at a painstaking projection of ritual suicide and its social significance as presented in Wole Soyinka's two plays, *Death and the King's Horseman* and *The Strong Breed*.

## II. RITUAL SUICIDE IN DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN

The ritual suicide in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* revolves around the horseman of the king (Elesin Oba) who has to commit a ritual death a month after the death of the king. His carrier role is what the tradition and custom of the people demands. The death of the horseman marks the submission to unknown power, also to the divine will of the ancestral world.

The ritual suicide of the horseman serves as a link between the community and the world of the ancestors. The horseman is a representation of the custodian of tradition. Soyinka in his note to *Death and the King's Horseman* describes the horseman as 'human vehicle' whose transitional death ensures a connection between the world of the living, the dead and the unborn. His ritual death is symbolic because if he fails to die, the whole community will be in disorder. His death thus symbolizes and ensures the continuity and guarantees the well being of the people.

The duty of Elesin Oba to die for the sake of his community is what takes preeminence in the play, though, there are other issues of clash of culture and colonialism. Every discussion that takes place between Elesin Oba and the Praise Singer is about his death. The Praise Singer, Olohunyo keeps reminding him that he must not fail his people, and if he does, he knows the implications:

Praise Singer:

Our world was never wrenched from its true course.

Elesin:

The gods have said no.

Praise Singer:

There is only one home to the life of a mussel; there...

Elesin:

It did not in the time of my fore fathers. It shall not in mine (pg.11).

The horseman is a heir to this role. In this community, the choice of a carrier is not just made. This is clearly buttressed when a market woman angrily confronts sergeant Amusa that "you ignorant man. It is not he who calls himself Elesin Oba, it is his blood that says it. As it is called out to his father before him and will to his son after him" (pg.13). The horseman enjoys whatever the king enjoys. He is celebrated,

praised and respected. As he enters a passage before the market, he is pursued by drummers and praise-singers.

Praise Singer:

In your time, we do not double the peace of farmstead (pg.13)

The praises for the horseman is to his carrier role, as the community expects him to die when the time comes.

Iyaloja:

But you, husband of multitudes

Elesin:

My reign is loosened. I am a Master...

Nothing. What! Has no one told you yet? I

go to keep my friend and master's company

Woman:

The town, the very land was yours (pg.14-15)

The above dialogue shows the conversation between the horseman and his people as he is praised and honoured. Everyone in the community knows the essence of the horseman and the implication of his declination of his death on the community as a whole.

Ritual suicide is not an exception in *Death and the King's Horseman*. Even before the manifestation of the suicidal act, the ceremony that precedes it has filled the air in the community.

Pilking:

Amusa's report. Listen. 'I have to report that it came to my information that one prominent chief, namely the Elesin Oba, is to commit death to night...

James :

Did I hear you say commit death?

Pilking:

Obviously, he means murder.

James:

You mean a ritual murder?

Joseph:

Tonight sir? You mean that chief who is going to kill himself?

Pilking:

What?

James:

What do you mean, kill himself?

Pilking:

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

Joseph:

No master, he will not kill anybody and no one will kill him. He will simply die! (pg.26)

Joseph goes further to clarify that it is the demand of the native law and custom. "... the king died last month. Tonight is his burial but before they can bury him, the Elesin must die so as to accompany him to heaven... he is the king's Chief Horseman" (pg.27).

The prevention of the horseman from carrying out his duty invites great accusation against him, also the ultimate blame that should have been against the District Officer, Simon Pilking, is shifted upon him. The Yoruba society gives ritual a great importance even more than life itself. This is

why Iyaloja says' "...and you? What gives you the right to obstruct our leader of men in the performance of his duty?"

Olunde, irrespective of his literate status came home after he had received a cable from a relative that the king is dead. Due to his richness in his indigenous culture, he came home so as to come and bury his father, who he believed would have committed ritual suicide. Olunde is, though modern, still gives culture and tradition great importance. He does not see this cultural practice as barbaric. In his conversation with Jane, he says that his father has died, unknown to him that the ritual process has been disrupted. The horseman laments thus:

"I am disturbed from fulfilling my destiny. Did you think it all out before this plan to push our world from its course and sever the cord that links us to the great origin?" (pg.63). He lacks the strength that could take him over the last measure of earth into the land of the dead.

Iyaloja says that the horseman has betrayed the community. "...you have betrayed us". She talks about the ceremonies of the dead, she says that without the death of the King's Horseman, the king will be kept waiting at the gate to the "here-after and when the narrow gate is opened, it will not stay for laggards who drag their feet in dung and vomit, whose lips are reeking of left-over of lesser men". The lateness of the ritual suicide will cause the king to wander in evil forest among spirits who are enemies of human beings. The ritual suicide in *Death and the King's Horseman* comes in two ways: The horseman is the only carrier of this period who is expected to die and be buried with the dead king but towards the end of the play, Olunde, who is supposed to be the next horseman kills himself in the place of his father. Following this, the horseman kills himself at the sight of the corpse of his son. According to Osofisan (2008:166), "the play does not merely hang upon the frame of ritual, the play is the ritual itself". The play thus records the voluntary killing of oneself in the name of ritual. Olunde and his father, the horseman kill themselves to preserve the honour of their family

### III. RITUAL SUICIDE IN *THE STRONG BREED*

The issue of ritual suicide in this play brings into focus Soyinka's preoccupation with the pain and problems that plague the life of an individual whose assertive will fails with the collective consciousness of his environment, especially in his call for sanity. This individual (Eman) ends up as a sacrificial victim whose death transforms the direction of change.

*The Strong Breed* aims at the psychic build up of the readers. It is a play that when read at first, an attempt of deducing the ritual suicide will only amount to ritual killing. The ritual in the play is only gotten when one probes into the conscious mind of the writer and that of his central character Eman. Soyinka gives a psychological presentation of the work; therefore, the understanding of the work needs a psychological and conscious analysis.

Many times, Eman's behaviours and character contradict. If one can take note of Eman very well, he flees his native home due to his aversion and fear for ritual because he did not want to involve himself but in the second community where

he finds himself, he displays his interest in ritual, if not consciously, then unconsciously.

Summa:

You will have to make up... Eman, are we going or aren't we? You will...

Eman:

There is still time – if you want to go

Summa:

If I want to go... and you? You don't really want to leave here. You never want.

Eman:

My gift for today's festival, en ehn?(pg.1)

The above excerpt shows the comfortable state of Eman with ritual in his second community. When the play opens, Summa intensely and desperately pleads with Eman to leave, but he seems tied, unable to escape the fate that is to come. Soyinka is able to project the belief of the Yoruba through Eman about the division of man into physical and spiritual. Most times, the spiritual man dominates the activities of the physical man.

In the play, Eman is mostly physically opposed to ritual or carrier mission but out of perfect scrutiny, he is not. The physical man is the physical body that is characterized by eyes, ears and other parts of the body while the spiritual man is characterized by fate; destiny and soul and at times blood. Soyinka makes use of this contradiction between body and blood in the presentation of the doom that befalls Eman. The overwhelming control of the physical man by the spiritual man is seen in the conversation between Summa and Eman:

Eman:

I am going to the village...

I shan't be back before nightfall

Summa:

Yes

Eman:

Well, what do you want me to do?

Summa:

The lorry was hooting just now

Eman:

I didn't hear it (pg.7).

The above makes us to know the level of control that the blood has over the decision of the body. Eman could have been absent during the ritual, but he hesitates and could not go because the spirit man (soul, fate, destiny and blood) has deafened his ears. "I didn't hear it". Eman's response to Summa's statement that she has renounced her father, seems casual and normal. He says quite simply: "renouncing oneself is not so easy, surely you know that", but when viewed in relation to Summa's decision and in the light of his role as a carrier – a would-be scapegoat, it is significantly meaningful.

Eman's statement that "I am very much my father's son", acquires a profound meaning when he realizes that his father died as a carrier. This implies that he will surely die as his father died a carrier – a pronouncement from the region of the soul rather than that of influence of his normal decision. Eman will never run from the call of his fate, because it is that which will lead him to fulfilling his carrier and salvific mission with absolute acceptance and admittance;

Eman:

I am unfitted for your work father

Old man:

It is only time you need son. Stay longer  
(pg.2b).

The old man instructs Eman not to go because he is only going to give to others what is rightly theirs.

Old man:

I tell you it is true. Your own blood ...

Eman:

There are other tasks in life father. This one...

Old man:

I am very sad. You only go to give to others what rightly belongs to us. You will use your strength among thieves. They are thieves...

The plot of the play just changed all of a sudden. Now, the intensity of happenings is beaming very high. Ifada was the intended Carrier that was pursued by the ritualist led by Jaguna and Oroge; but Ifada now becomes a free man as Eman takes his place as the sacrificial victim. This change of role is beyond the physical. Eventually, when the 'effigy' is dressed in Eman's buba (a kind of Yoruba dress), this communicates an idea that Eman has taken the role of the Carrier. One can claim that Eman takes the role out of pity for Ifada, but it is more obvious that the issue is more than pity. Chris Egharevba (2017:85) hints on this when he observes that:

Eman's decision to a large extent is a fulfillment of the old man's prediction that Eman's strong blood would assert itself despite his conscious desires.

Therefore, whether Eman decides to go to his village or accept the role of a carrier, he bears that mark of a sufferer by inclination or destiny. That Eman is a member of the strong breed makes him to possess a particular kind of suffering which manifests at birth throughout his life to grant him a tragic and catastrophic end. What befalls Eman is what has been prognosticated. Yorubas believe that everyone chooses his/her fate or destiny while coming to the world. With this, Soyinka presents Eman and classifies him as a member of the strong breed.

The flash-back to Eman's past life shows that what befalls him at the end is his chosen destiny. The significance of the flashback, which is vision has been observed by Egharevba (2017:90) thus: "in his first vision, we saw Eman refusing to follow his father's footsteps as a carrier". Literarily, as well as symbolically, Eman later follows in his father's footsteps, dressed like him as a carrier with the strength to do voluntarily the assignments which others rejected. At the end, Eman shows himself as the true son of his father. Soyinka uses ritual suicide in *The Strong Breed* to project a pessimistic vision of man and society. He works on the psychic buildup of the protagonist towards the essence of his tragedy and doom. Eman could not escape his tragic end. The inability of Eman to understand the essence of concern and urgency in Summa's tone is his making that would cause him to suffer.

Eman:

I will simply stay here till dawn. I have done enough

Woman:

Oh my head, what have I done? ... eh!  
It is the carrier! He is here, the carrier

As the play suddenly takes the turn of Eman as a carrier, here comes the total submission of Eman to his fate. This is evident in the conversation between the girl and Eman when Eman hid from his enemies.

Girl:

Are you the carrier?

Eman:

Yes. I am Eman.

Here, we can see that Eman has confirmed himself as the carrier.

His attempt to escape makes a change in the ritual of the year as a trap is set for him to die. But whether a trap is set for him or not, the success of the death was engineered by his decision to take the role of the ritual carrier as demanded by his strong blood, fate and destiny. Osofisan (2008:50) has this to say concerning Eman's fate:

Eman is equal to Oedipus who verily strives against the shackles of fate and finally pays the price through the harvest of maledictions and terror.

In this play, Soyinka is able to give ritual suicide a definition that may be a little different from the commonly known definitions. Suicide is an act of killing oneself while ritual suicide is an act of dying voluntarily in the course of a ritual, but in the case of *The Strong Breed*, ritual suicide is an act of dying based on the carrier's or scapegoat's absolute admittance of the role as such admittance is dictated by the spirit man- soul, fate, destiny and blood. In the play, it is fate, destiny and blood that dictate the acceptance of the death of Eman. This is better stated here:

Old man:

Listen to your father. Go back

Eman:

But father! Wait father. I am coming with you... wait ... wait for me father...

Eman gives himself up a willing victim in place of Ifada. He is hanged for the sins of the people. Though he is no longer willing to suffer for the sins of the community by the time he died, his unstable mind in respect to the making of his fate, leads him towards doom as the accomplishment is propelled by the community. Also, this unstable mind psychologically leads him out of his homeland that is safe, to the hazardous community where he meets his tragic end. So, Eman's ritual suicidal act is an indirect one which has its source in the deficit and insufficient state of stability of the mind of the tragic character. Thus, characterized by the power of fate over man, the outcome of an unstable mind, coupled with the role of blood, are peculiar dictators of man's journey through life.

#### IV. SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF RITUAL SUICIDE IN THE TWO PLAYS

There are many reasons or functions of ritual suicide in Yoruba traditional communities as reflected in the chosen plays for this study. These functions will be discussed under two broad perspectives here, which are the connection and purgation of evil perspectives respectively.

The heart of man is full of evil thoughts. Hence, there is need for constant renewal. In African traditional communities, someone usually takes the role of a carrier and bears the evil

of the society at the end of the year to take away all the evil done in the society throughout the year. This is the ritual of purgation of evil as it is done in *The Strong Breed*. The community's evils and sins are assumed to have been transferred to the carrier. The ritual suicide may be an attempt to avert and prevent an outbreak of epidemics or diseases. So someone has to die for the community to ward off evil from happening. Jacobs (2007:154) puts it more. Succinctly thus:

Human sacrifice is the climax of sacrifice. And this is because human blood has a peculiar physical value in which case it represents the supreme act of total givingness- the offer of which has neither parallel nor comparison. It bonds the living with the unbreakable fetters of loyalty and dependence.

Ritual suicide may also serve as a link between the world of the living, the dead and the unborn. The death of the horseman symbolizes the continuity of the Yoruba world in order to ensure the wellbeing of the people. Failure to carry out the ritual rites can set the whole community adrift. Thus, ritual suicide satisfies the emotional and spiritual needs of the people, ensures social bonds and demonstration of respect and submission to divine forces and prevention of calamities among the people. Ritual suicide also has functions of expressing, fixing and reinforcing the shared beliefs of a society. It also aids in creating a firm sense of group identity.

Eldred Jones (1998:29) says about Wole Soyinka's works ... they are concerned with the fate of man in his environment, the struggle for survival; the cost of survival, the real meaning of progress, the necessity for sacrifice of man is to make any progress to the role of death – even the necessity for death in man's life.

The social function of ritual suicide in *Death and the King's Horseman*. and *The Strong Breed*, are mainly on the issue of connection which may be between the living and the divine or a form of social bond in a community and the purgation of evil from a community.

Staal (2009:81) says concerning the ritual world of Soyinka's plays:

The communal need for cleansing and restoration and the popular tradition which aims at imparting physical and psychological therapy, the release and satiation of long, stifled emotions through the mechanics of satire, comedy and masquerade, and on the other hand, is the ritual tradition which reaches towards the same kind of restoration on a far more profound, more solemn level through the mechanism of rite and cultic symbolism.

The restoration in this sense refers to the 'balance of connection' while the cleansing refers to 'purgation of evil'. Therefore, the twofold functions of ritual suicide in the two plays are ensuring social connection and purgation of evil.

Ritual suicides in these two plays bring to the fore, the sacrificial acts that change the course of a society. Ritual is transformational and it engineers change and reform. This is why Wilfred Cartey (2009) sees ritual suicide as "sacrificial act that would interrupt the cycle of a unending history and bring to an end an inherent and tragic history".

#### V. CONCLUSION

Ritual in Yoruba society is an aspect of life that is unimaginably important. It is ritual that keeps the society and the existence of man going – ensuring the balance of life socially, emotionally and spiritually. The two plays in this study present the preeminence of ritual and its effect on the community and even on the individual as the balance of life rests upon that individual who is to take the role of a savior – to promote and actualize some social functions.

*Death and the King's Horseman* has solidified the belief that ritual, which may at times be in the form of suicide is an ingrained part of a human community based on the social functions it carries, that is, it explores ritual majorly on the aspect of connection. The metamorphosis of the living to the world of the dead ensures consistent and uninterrupted chain of life. The other social function is purgation of evil from the society.

*The Strong Breed* also presents ritual as an act for purgation of evil and as connection for the empowerment of social relationship among the people. With the symbolic nature of ritual suicide, the primary and ultimate attachment that makes it an inveterate part of human society are the social functions of 'metaphysical connection' and 'purgation of evil' which it carries.

The central congenial aspect of ritual that separates it from actions and activities is its sacredness (transcendent realm) as against profanity and secularism. Therefore, ritual is the spiritual reality in relation to the ultimate values of a community. The difference between ritual and non-ritual entities is marked by 'ritual tradition' which is strictly achieved by particular set of rules as characterized by interaction with entities ordinarily inaccessible.

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