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African Divinity and Female Agency in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*

Stephen Okari Onkoba¹, Nicholas Kamau Goro²

¹ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1958-0343>

Email: okaristeven@yahoo.com

²Department of Literary and Communication Studies, Laikipia University

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3025-4047>

Email: nkamau@laikipia.ac.ke

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ABSTRACT

Female agency plays a prominent and significant role in spiritual discourses. The paper examines African notions of divinity as mediated by female voices. Anchored on psychoanalytical theory, the paper examines Wole Soyinka's *Death and King's Horseman* and Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* with a view to showing how African traditional notions of the divine provide the playwrights with a platform on which to stage the place of female agencies in African cosmology. The paper further shows how female agency as represented in the plays unravels discourse on indigenous African epistemologies. The paper comes to the conclusion that whereas scholarly attention has largely focused on the marginalization of the female gender, Soyinka and Rotimi's play reify a discourse that elevate and celebrate female agency.

Key words: African epistemologies, African cosmology, Divinity, Female Agency, Rotimi, Soyinka

Introduction

Female agency refers to the capacity of women and girls to take purposeful action and pursue goals, free from the threat of violence or retribution. As Kelsy (2012) asserts, agency is most easily visible when individuals resist the status quo (p.5). Female agency in this paper is used to refer to sundry forms of competencies females explicitly or implicitly possess. This agency helps the female characters to overcome patriarchal oppression and exclusion emanating from aspects of divinity. Female agency manifests at three levels: decision making, leadership and collective action. Despite being rooted in African milieus, African drama reimagine revolutionary of female voices in conceptualizing shades of

reality unique to African cosmology and divinity. The exploration of female voices as mediated by African divinity manifest at variegated shades.

Female agency, therefore, presupposes inherent autonomy and freedom to challenge social and political structures. In other words, people exhibit agency when they act in unexpected ways, despite the ways in which actions are shaped by social institutions (Giddens 1979) and internalized customs and traditions (Bourdieu 1990). The paper investigates Soyinka and Rotimi's appropriation of such female agency to comment on notions of African divinity and cosmology extrapolated in their drama.

African indigenous religious beliefs and practices are multifaceted. Though rooted in Africa, such beliefs and practices are not homogenous. Although there are varieties of traditional African religions, they share more similarities than differences in their practices (Stanton, 2004). Stanton's thesis is buttressed by Ndemenu (2018) who posits that one observable commonality is that most traditional African religions do not have a written Holy text for references. Consequently, he asserts that it is difficult for any Westerner and non-African to have an in-depth knowledge about them because their beliefs and practices have not been canonized as was the case with the Bible when the Council of Nicaea met under the auspices of the Roman Emperor Constantine I to initiate the writing of the Scriptures. Owing to presence of oral sources to authenticate indigenous African beliefs, it is not possible to conclusively vouch for homogenous thought systems underpinning African cosmologies. However, notwithstanding the underlying differences, a number of commonalities and convergences are evident as diverse indigenous beliefs from different geographical locations in Africa are united by polytheistic character of their religions. The manner of exercising allegiance to metaphysical forces inhabiting their incorporeal universe, however, may differ slightly or substantially. It is beliefs and practices, attributable to African communities, which constitutes aspects of African divinity delineated in Soyinka and Rotimi's selected plays. It is significant to note from the outset that whereas major world religions such as Christianity and Islam espouse monotheism, African divinity is subsumed in polytheistic strands of spirituality.

The paper's exposition of female agency and divinity is grounded on African cosmology. African cosmology can be construed to refer to various perspectives of viewing reality from a uniquely African lens. Nyang (1980) indicates that Africa's traditional cosmology is diverse, but behind this diversity lies the core of shared beliefs which spread across the continent. It, thus, comprises Africans' worldviews on universes defining their existence. Although the continent of Africa has been influenced vastly by the West, she continues to draw most of her values from a traditional cosmology. The quest to discover the origin and nature of the universe, as well as the role human beings play in the grand scheme of creation, has been at the heart of Africans epistemology.

African Cosmology, Female Agency and Divinity in Soyinka and Rotimi's Dramaturgy

Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* gives a glimpse into historical events that took place in Oyo, a Yoruba town in 1946. Being the protagonist and king's horseman, Elesin Oba looks forward to will his physical life after the death of his king. He is, however, encumbered by an incorrigible and uncompromising Simon Pilkings, a British colonial district officer, mandated to safeguard a Western judicial matrix which does not condone ritual suicide. This clash of the Yoruba cosmological praxis, which approves ritual sacrifice, and a Western legal system abhorring any form of sacrificial death destabilizes the Yoruba universe.

As Karimi (2015) avers, Pilkings, who is sent to Oyo as a representative of British colonial rule, finds himself in a precarious position. He believes that Elesin is "to commit death...as result of native custom" (Soyinka DKH 26), therefore Pilkings concludes that it is his duty to intervene and refrain Elesin from carrying out this action. Elesin, having already demonstrated signs of his reluctance to

exercise his duty to his king, does not resist Pilkings' attempts to sway him from following through with the ritual suicide. When Elesin's apprehensive nature eclipses his obligation to his society, conflict arises which disrupts the peace of his community. To restore cosmic balance, however, Olunde steps into his father's shoes and commits a ritual sacrifice. Upon the realization that his son supplanted his horseman role, Elesin Oba subjects himself to a belated death cloaked in ignominy. The actions of Elesin Oba and his son are in sync with Soyinka's view of tragedy. Wole Soyinka, in his essay "The Fourth Stage," defines the different stages in the life of the soul in Yoruba belief – pre-birth, life, post-death – and presents an intermediary stage of transition from one to the other. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka uses his own theory of Yoruba cosmology to inform his writing, and Elesin Oba and Olunde can be read as not belonging to the normal Yoruba populace, but rather exist purely in the fourth stage of transition since they are destined for death from birth.

Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, on the other hand, is a story that recounts a man's attempt to run away from his inescapable destiny. The play is a tragedy, an adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. Despite its transposition to an African cultural landscape, Rotimi ingeniously infuses an African setting in the Yoruba town of Kutuje. It revolves around Odewale, a royal son, destined to kill his father and marry his mother.

To avert the doomed prophecy by Baba Fakunle, the Ile Ife priest, Gbonka is ordered to throw the son into the evil forest. The royal servant disobeys the injunction given and hands the ill-fated child to Alaka and eventually, the child gets adopted by King Ogundele. In a strange twist of fate, the adopted son learns of the doomed prophecy of killing his father and marrying his mother afterwards. Thinking his foster parents are his biological parents, he flees his town and ends up killing his biological father.

Upon discovering the king's death, the people of Kutuje are vanquished by the Ikolu tribe for many years. Odewale, however, comes to their aid and delivers them from the oppressive yoke of the Ikolu tribe. Thereafter, a series of calamities ensue eleven years after the coronation of King Odewale. Everybody, including the king, begins to look for a panacea to the problem. This makes King Odewale to send Prince Aderopo to Ile-Ife to seek divination from the Ifa Oracle. Unfortunately, Aderopo returns and refuses to unravel the information received from Ile-Ife. Following this event, King Odewale requests for the Ifa Oracle diviner, Baba Fakunle, from Oyo and upon his arrival, he declines to solve the riddle. This enrages King Odewale who suspects that the diviner has teamed up with Aderopo, his (Odewale's) perceived enemy. Tensions between the duo of King Odewale and Fakunle degenerate into physical assault which is a demonstration of hubris (i.e. hot temper) in the king.

At this stage, the play hinges on a flashback that eventually reveals Odewale's past as the accursed child who would kill his father and marry his mother. Having been caught in this web, King Odewale realizes that he has brought misfortune upon his people. He, therefore, blindfolds himself and abdicates the throne for an unknown destination while Queen Ojuola (Odewale's mother and wife) commits suicide.

The confluence of deities and female characters in Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* and Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* is covert. In Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, the interplay between divinities and female characters is witnessed in the consequences which befall the female gender as a result of divine acts engendered by deities. The female gender finds herself mainstreamed in the actualization of the matrix of her community.

Queen Ojuola's divine role in *The Gods Are Not to Blame* is more pronounced when she learns that King Odewale is her biological son who had slain her former husband. In the play, Queen Ojuola is presented as an accomplice to her husbands' decision to harm the doomed child (Odewale). At

Odewale's birth, Baba Fakunle who is the Ile-Ife priest, had prophesied that the child was going to kill his father and marry his mother. Thus, the spiritual mission of the child from the ethereal cosmos renders it doomed. In order to stop the prophecy's fulfilment, the Queen and her husband orders that the child be thrown into a forest and left to die. In as much as the gods could be punishing the Queen for her complicity in the attempts made at the doomed child's life, it should also be noted that King Adetusa's wife was not an accomplice to her spouse's crime which made the gods to curse their offspring. Although the punishment meted out to Ojuola could be permissible for having had incestuous relationships with her son, it could be argued that she did not have prior knowledge that she was getting married to her son. The incestuous relationships can, however, be explained with close reference to Freud's notion of Oedipus complex.

Bressler (2007) remarks that "Freud asserts that during the late infantile stage, all infant males possess an erotic attachment to their mothers. Unconsciously, the infant desires to engage in sexual union with his mother, but he recognizes a rival for his mother's affection: the father" (128). Odewale unknowingly kill his father before he marries the widowed Queen who happen to be his biological mother. This is an actualization of the Freudian Oedipus complex. It is also significant to note that the gods in *The Gods Are Not to Blame* conceal the true identity of the tragic hero to his biological mother. Gbonka, the slain king's servant informs Queen Ojuola and the chiefs that the king had been murdered by a gang of thieves. Hence, this conceals the true identity of Odewale since he did not also disclose that he had given the doomed child to Alaka in the bush. Upon his coronation, Odewale is gifted Queen Ojuola, his biological mother, as his wife. This, therefore, portrays female gender that powerfully brings to fruition what had been decreed by deities. This, however, also reveals a skewed relationship between deities and female characters in Rotimi's play.

In *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, the two daughters of King Odewale are also forced to accompany their father to exile as a result of a doomed prophecy. Like Antigone and Ismene in *Oedipus at Colonus*, they too are robbed of their nascent dreams and social lives. The young girls are coerced to fend for their father and also guide him in exile. Though their forced exile with their father may be construed as a form of marginalization, we argue that the girls' action is redemptive. It is vested with divine power to redeem the community from the afflictions which had ravaged it. Though the girls having been sired by the deposed king could also be viewed as ethical pollution which the community must cleanse itself. However, notwithstanding the ethical dimension, the female agency is at the forefront of a society's regeneration after King Odewale's defilement of its social fabric.

In Rotimi's seminal play, Queen Ojuola is given as wife to Odewale by the elders. This happens once he saves the kingdom of Kutuje from its hostile neighbours, the Ijekun tribe. Like in *Oedipus the King*, the marrying off of Queen Ojuola without her consent reveals how divine curses foment suffering of citizens in Thebes and Kutuje and also, perpetuates degradation of the female characters. Thus, spirituality is shown to enhance marginalization of women in the play. From another perspective, however, Queen Ojuola's marital union to Odewale who assumes kingship can be viewed as complementary to the powers of women to participate in decision making and problem solving of ailing societies.

The adverse impact of aspects of divinity on women's condition is also depicted in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. In the play, Elesin takes advantage of his spiritual role to ask for unjustified favours one of which is dispossessing Iyaloja's son of his bride. According to Freud, 'the pleasure principle craves only pleasures and instantaneous satisfaction of instinctual drives, ignoring moral and sexual boundaries set by society' (Bressler, 2007:145). The Freudian principle elucidates Elesin's illogical demand to be given a girl who had already been betrothed to Iyaloja's son. What Elesin does is akin to dispossessing his son of his bride. But he goes ahead to blackmail Iyaloja to honour his demand without any shred of shame or social guilt so as to satisfy his instantaneous pleasures. As the

dead King's Horseman, he is just supposed to will his death so as to accompany the late king to the spirit world. Soyinka provides his own explanation for Elesin's doubts about his destiny in "The Fourth Stage," saying "just as man is grieved by a consciousness of the loss of the eternal essence of his being and must indulge in symbolic transactions to recover his totality of being" (144-145). Elesin is not lamenting his impending death, but rather the loss of his worldly pleasures and so seeks to experience his three favorite aspects of life one last time. This perhaps explain his fervent desire to satisfy his sexual cravings before willing his death.

Indeed, due to Elesin's opportunism and weakness of the flesh, he slyly demands to be given a last bride before embarking on his spiritual journey: "All you who stand before the spirit that dares the opening of the last door of passage, dare to rid my going of regrets! My wish transcends the blotting out of thought in one mere moment's tremor of the senses. Do me credit and do me honour. I am girded for the route beyond. Burdens of waste and longing. Then let me travel light. Let seed that will not serve the stomach on the way remain behind" (21). The threat made by Elesin to coerce Iyaloja to sanction his request to wed the bride betrothed is unethical. It reveals a society which tramples on rights of women in two ways. The bride's consent is not sought but imposed since she is expected to agree to the decision of her prospective mother-in-law in spite of not having been married officially to her son. Secondly, Iyaloja as a leader of market women is presumably expected to acquiesce to Elesin's demand because he happens to be a prominent chief in her community. This points to a society which stifles female voices in issues affecting them.

Of great significance, however, is Elesin's abuse of his spiritual role to shatter dreams of the young bride engaged to Iyaloja's son. In this instance, it could be argued that it is the spiritual requirements of the King's Horseman which leads to the deflowering of the bride and the forceful marital union which results in her miserable condition when Elesin is stopped by the colonial agency mediated by the persona of Simon Pilkings, a British District officer, from executing his spiritual role to its logical completion. The miserable condition of the bride is evident in stage directions: "A wide iron-barred gate stretches almost the whole width of the cell in which Elesin is imprisoned. His wrists are encased in thick iron bracelets chained together; he stands against the bars, looking out. Seated on the ground to one side is his recent Bride, her eyes bent perpetually to the ground" (22). The public embarrassment and humiliation the bride wallows in can be attributed to Elesin's carnal greed. His failure in his spiritual role to will his death has wider implications to the bride's future. It means that she is destined to be an object of perpetual ridicule to her community for having been married to a coward who put the survival of his community at risk.

The bride's misery is further foregrounded by Elesin's suicide when the corpse of his son is brought to his cell by the market women, which in essence consigns the bride to widowhood in at a tender age. We view the bride's fate as an outcome of Elesin's misuse of his spiritual role to exploit women in his society. In as much as Elesin is not a deity, it could be argued that the Yoruba gods contribute remotely to the marginalization of women in Elesin's community since the spiritual role of the King's Horseman stems from a Yoruba spirituality which prescribes death of a king's Horseman thirty days after the death of the king. The death of the King's Horseman after one month is meant to facilitate the ~~death~~ king's passage to the spirit world. In this regard, the bride's miserable situation and Elesin's manipulation of the market women in an effort to fulfil a spiritual requirement reveal a lopsided relationship between divinity and female characters in *Death and the King's Horseman*.

In *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, a divine curse contributes to dismantling of domestic chains meant for the female characters. It is the daughters who accompany the deposed kings to exile. King Odewale is led to exile by his daughters. It is ironical from an African perspective that the sons decide to remain at home instead of leading King Odewale to exile. Consequently, it can be concluded that the divine curse, which causes banishment of the kings in Sophocles and Rotimi's dramaturgy, ends up

empowering female characters as they perform roles previously reserved for the male gender. Just like in Rotimi's play, King Oedipus in *Oedipus the King* is led to exile by his daughters, Antigone and Ismene. The role the female characters play in the two plays is redemptive as it contributes to ridding respective communities of ethical pollution emblemized by the deposed kings. It is only after the execution of banishments that the societies depicted in Rotimi and Sophocles' drama regenerate themselves.

Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* also reveals how an aspect of Yoruba spirituality serves to elevate the women in community matters. In contradistinction to Elesin who dishonours his community by not willing his death at the stipulated time, Iyaloja and fellow market women step in, in a collective action, to fill the void left by the king's horseman. Owing to Pilkings' arrest of Elesin which disrupts the ritual suicide. Pilkings is a British District Officer mandated to maintain law and order in a Nigerian society where Elesin Oba's kingdom is located. Iyaloja as a leader mobilizes women to confront the colonial agent and ensure that all necessary rituals are performed. In a heated argument with Simon Pilkings, Iyaloja tells the District Officer candidly: "You will. (*Passionately.*) But this is one oath he cannot shirk. White one, you have a king here, a visitor from your land. We know of his presence here. Tell me, were he to die would you leave his spirit roaming restlessly on the surface of earth? Would you bury him here among those you consider less than human? In your land have you no ceremonies of the dead?" (78). In this exchange, Iyaloja fearlessly lectures Simon Pilkings on the efficacy of the aborted sacrifice in Yoruba spirituality. She argues that the ritual suicide is a necessary condition in the burial of their dead king. The confrontation between Iyaloja and the colonial agent shows how an aspect of Yoruba spirituality hoists women to the public space. Whereas men's input is muted, Soyinka's play reifies women to ensure that the Yoruba cosmology is not desecrated by extrinsic forces.

It is also significant to underscore Iyaloja's rebuttal of Pilkings' vilification of the import of Yoruba's sacrificial death. Pilkings' indignation is evident when he says that in the West "we don't make our chiefs commit suicide to keep him company" (78). Implied in the colonial agent's statement is his perception that he considers the cultural practice barbaric and illogical. What he fails to mention is that in the West, soldiers also die in the name of protecting their countries and kings. Indeed, there were massive deaths of soldiers during the First and Second World wars. The District Officer's condemnation also reveals his failure to appreciate the significance of sacrificial death in the Yoruba universe. This, perhaps, explains Iyaloja's patronizing tone in her response to Simon Pilkings: "Child, I have not come to help your understanding. (*Points to Elesin.*) This is the man whose weakened understanding holds in bondage to you. He knows the meaning of a king's passage; he was not born yesterday. He knows the peril to the race when our dead father, who goes as intermediary, waits and waits and knows he is betrayed. He knows when the narrow gate was opened and he knows it will not stay for laggards who drag their feet in dung and vomit, whose lips are reeking of the left-overs of lesser men. He knows he has condemned our king to wander in the void of evil with beings who are enemies of life" (78). Iyaloja's reference to the colonial agent as a child underscores the immensity of ignorance of the District Officer in appreciating the spiritual magnitude of the ritual suicide in the Yoruba cosmos. This is notwithstanding the fact that Pilkings had been serving as a representative of the Imperial British Government in Nigeria where the incident occurs.

Contrary to Simon Pilkings' dismissive attitude on a critical aspect of African divinity, the ritual suicide in *Death and the King's Horseman* is a key cog in the Yoruba cosmology. According to Mekunda (2019): *Death and the King's Horseman* is a celebration of death and the play becomes a gigantic metaphor of the living as it explores the rite of passage or transition. Thus, ritual becomes a celebration on the rite of passage which could be aptly employed to deal with the society in the process of change" (3). From Mekunda's views, it is evident that ritual suicide is necessary in the rejuvenation of the community. It makes the transition to the ancestral world possible. The sacrificial death is not a meaningless ritual as

Simon Pilkings believes. Rather, Elesin's death is meant to fill a key space in the Yoruba cosmological praxis. This is consonant with Mekunda's (2019) assertions: "Elesin Oba (literally translated as "Horseman of the King") owes his duty to join his departed master, the Alafin, in the ancestral world 30 days after the Alafin's "voyage", thereby completing the cycle of the "old plantain" and opening a new lease of life both for himself and his society. It is, thus, as a result of his realization of this duty that he owes himself and his society that he goes to the market, a place he has chosen to carry his leave-taking to commune with one of the most influential groups of his community, the market women" (5). The central place the market women occupy in ensuring that Elesin's ritual role is performed efficiently brings to the fore their conspicuous and critical place in the Yoruba universe.

The prominence given to female agency in the Yoruba spiritual matrix is also pronounced greatly when the women carry the corpse of Elesin's son to Elesin's dungeon. They do this to enable Elesin to perform requisite ceremonies to enable the community bury their Alafin (king). Without any iota of fear, Iyaloja passionately tells Simon Pilkings: "What we ask is little enough. Let him release our king so he can ride on homewards alone. The messenger is on his way on the backs of the women. Let him send word through the heart that is folded up within the bolt. It is the least of all his oaths, it is the easiest fulfilled" (78). Not wanting to endanger his community, Olunde (Elesin's son) commits suicide to step into his father's shoes once Elesin is stopped from willing his death by Simon Pilkings. Olunde's ritual's suicide is meant to ensure cosmic harmony between the living and ancestral spirits.

By offering himself as a sacrifice in his father's place Olunde accords his community a chance to bury their king without any dire consequences. The women ensure the cosmic harmony is maintained by carrying Olunde's corpse to Elesin to enable him perform the last rituals as demanded by his culture. It is important to note that at this point, in spite of the patriarchal nature of Elesin's community, not even a single man accompanies the women to deliver Olunde's body at the dungeon where the white man had incarcerated Elesin. In this respect, it can be argued that Wole Soyinka's utilization of the ritual suicide in *Death and the King's Horseman* serves as a form of women empowerment.

The critical place of divinity in mainstreaming the female voice is brought to fore in the confrontation between male policemen and the daughters of the market women when an attempt is made to arrest Elesin on the eve of the ritual suicide. Sergeant Amusa informs Iyaloja: "Madam Iyaloja, I glad you come. You know me, I no like trouble but duty is duty. I am here to arrest Elesin for criminal intent. Tell these women to stop obstructing me in the performance of my duty" (38). The sergeant is sent by the white District Officer to stop Elesin from committing suicide. Knowing the significance of Elesin's role, however, the market women obstructs the African policemen from effecting the arrest. Afterwards, when the market women are about to acquiesce to the Sergeant's request, daughters of the market women resist: "No no Iyaloja, leave us to deal with him. He no longer knows his mother; we'll teach him" (39). With swift movement, the girls snatch the batons of two constables and their hats and start manhandling them. Of great import in the collective action manifest in the assaulting of the African police officers sent to arrest Elesin is the fact that the girls mimic the white man's language and mannerisms: "(in turn. In an 'English' accent) Well well it's Mister Amusa. Were you invited? (Play-acting to one another. The old women encourage them with their titters.) The use of mimicry is quite significant in registering Africans' protest against colonial interference to their cosmological universe.

The mimicry exhibited by the girls is, therefore, a response to the tension between the progression of the colonial relationship and the imperial power's desire for domination. The imitative process, "emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies" of "ironic compromise" for the individual caught between "the synchronic panoptical visions of domination [and] the demand for identity" (Bhabha 1994: 122). The mimicking of the white people's language and mannerisms is a form of resistance by the Yoruba girls against colonial agents out to contaminate their cultural identity. By

disarming the constables sent to arrest Elesin, the girls are able to protect their cultural space. This is meant to ensure that Elesin is not obstructed from performing his spiritual role to the dead king. From the foregoing, it is manifestly clear that aspects of divinity play a prominent role in mainstreaming the female voice in a typically patriarchal African society reflected in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*.

Conclusion

The discourse on how aspects of African divinity and female agency coalesce in Soyinka and Rotimi's plays has revealed that though the female is at first construed to be marginalized, the female characters in the dramaturgy of the two playwrights play prominent roles in their societies. The female gender ensures realization of key tenets of Yoruba cosmology. In a sense, then, Soyinka and Rotimi utilize dramatic spaces to enhance audibility of female voices in an African landscape often perceived to be oppressive and marginalizing for women.

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