

**LITERATURE, LANGUAGE AND  
NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

# LITERATURE, LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS:

A Festschrift in Honour of Theo Vincent

*Amoyokun C.O.*

Edited by

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and  
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## KING'S HORSEMAN OR OLOKUN-ESIN? HISTORY AND THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATION

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*Language has always been the dynamic hub of any literary ecosystem. Creating Literature in any other than the mother tongue was not just unimaginable in traditional Yoruba society; it was simply impossible.* – Akinwunmi Ishola (17).

*My decision to translate some of Soyinka's works arose from my conviction that African societies deserve to taste the fruits of the literary achievements their societies have generated.*  
– Akinwunmi Ishola. (18).

*...[a] translator must select equivalents for mere auxiliaries where these serve the essential purpose better than the precise original* – Wole Soyinka (4)  
*The truly creative writer who is properly uninhibited by ideological winds, chooses – and of course we can speculate on the sociological factors involved in this choice ad infinitum – he chooses when to question History – A Dance of the Forests; when to appropriate Ritual for ideological statements – The Bacchae of Euripides and equally, when to 'epochalize' History for its mythopoetic resourcefulness* – Death and the King's Horseman – Soyinka. (79)

Before we begin to move into the hinterlands of Wole Soyinka's drama, let us first of all settle the history or the fashionable conjecture over the "circumstances of birth" of *Death and the King's Horseman*, which is our main focus. According to Adedayo Williams, the play was written in a period of lonely exile, at a time when Soyinka was dogged by a transcendental homelessness. It is certain that this play is a response to

grave ideological and political pressures—pressures from whose concrete manifestations that famous snub at Cambridge cannot be excluded (69). On his own part, Wole Ogundele opines that the strategic contiguity of the period of the actual writing of the play and the Nigerian civil war is instructive and germane (79). But this is what Soyinka himself has to say about his play: “This slice of Oyo history has floated in and out of my creative consciousness since 1960. Once or twice I had been on the verge of writing it but other more pressing themes intervened... a year’s fellowship at Churchill College, Cambridge, 72/73 finally provided some uninterrupted leisure. The actual triggering event was a bust of Churchill on the stairs in the College named after him. The history came back; the play was written” (79). Generally, the critical enterprise is one fraught with the dangers of Intentional Fallacy as critics strain themselves to impute to a work what is fiercely alien to it in the first place. This subjectivization of essentially objective issues has constituted a red herring in literary practice.

*Death and the King's Horseman* is actually based on true-life events’ “events which took place in Oyo, an ancient Yoruba city of Nigeria, in 1946. That year, the lives of Elesin (Olori Elesin), his son, and the colonial District Officer intertwined with the disastrous results set out in the play” (143). However, we do know that World War II lasted between 1939-1945. Wole Soyinka had to situate his dramatic action amid this global conflict for what he calls “minor reasons of dramaturgy”. Soyinka may elect to downplay this strategic backpedaling in temporal terms, because his gaze is trained on extra-terrestrial concerns. However, we do not tag along with him on this score, since issues of real time, i.e. history are more important to us here. Since the substance of the play is historical, the playwright’s tinkering with history should not be glossed over. By the same token, Soyinka lambastes critics whom he accuses of situating his play to “the sadly familiar reductionist tendency”. For Soyinka, it will not do to indulge in culture-clash theoretics. In the light of this, the mythopoeic artist is usually wont to deploy concrete human events and actions as metaphoric scaffolding to rig up far larger and spiritually profound thematic concerns, and, in this instance, Soyinka avers that “The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind – the world of the living, the dead

and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links all: transition” (143). Indeed, Wole Soyinka, in one of the above-quoted epigraphs with which we started this paper, says that he chooses to “epochalize” History in order to expropriate its mythopoeic resourcefulness. Here, clearly, the dramatist has cashed in on the tragic essence of the 1946 saga: “metaphysical confrontation, the universe of the Yoruba mind which places the (historical) world of the living at the centre; and the human vehicle Elesin. In other words, here are present all three crucial ingredients of tragedy: a cosmic order and man’s place in it; the individual’s relation to his society and his place in it; the individual in relation to himself” (55).

Additionally, however, we must bear in mind that Wole Soyinka in *Death and the King's Horseman* is equally experimenting with his own idea of Yoruba (African) tragedy in contradistinction to the western, Judeo-Christian or Aristotelian tragedy, the blueprint of which Soyinka enunciated in his densely recondite but vastly important essay “The Fourth Stage”. Thus in “epochalising” (and, by extension, mythicizing) History, the creating ego takes liberties with historical facts (“for minor reasons of dramaturgy”) to flesh out the overarching problematique of ritual, or the master narrative of human social progress.

Akinwumi Ishola, a leading Yoruba scholar and writer of note, in the cited epigraph above, has chosen to translate rather than re-write the same play. Let us just say in passing that, as hinted at earlier on, *Death and the King's Horseman* is based on a popular communal event which Soyinka slightly distorted to achieve his own ideological intentions. Ordinarily, such a scholar as Akinwumi Ishola who champions the cause of the oral tradition and the need to provide “socially critical feedback” in mother-tongue literature, should have taken a more critical interest in Soyinka’s play, explored its stylistic properties vis-à-vis its semantic implications as they bear on the issue of the historic integrity of actual Yoruba communal life. All that, however, is mere wishful thinking. The fact before us now is that *Iku Olokun-Esin*, the Yoruba version of Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King's Horseman*, is the fulfillment of Akinwumi Ishola’s desire to translate the works of Wole Soyinka in order to allow indigenous Yorubas to “taste the fruits of the literary achievements their societies have generated”.

Usually, what we find are translations from African Languages into foreign ones like English, French, Portuguese and so on. Hence, Ulli Beier, the German-born scholar of Yoruba studies, says "Nobody who attempts to translate Yoruba into English will doubt that poetry is what is left out in translation" (1). Even Wole Soyinka expressed a similar sentiment in *Myth, Literature and the African World* where he says that something is always lost in translation (xi). However, we are here dealing with a reverse case: translation from an exoglossic idiom (i.e. English) into an indigenous mother tongue, the source language itself.

In spite of the seemingly provincial claims of Ishola, we do know that every translation, however, faithful, is a rejoinder of sorts. The resultant product of translation is, of necessity, a critical commentary on the original. The reason is because there is normally no one-to-one correspondence between the original and its translation(s). Every language derives its meanings, codes, and other networks of references and signification from the cultural universe of cosmic apprehension and negotiation. It is this underlying *langue* of a particular people that informs the rhetorical and stylistic tropes of artistic composition, the numerous acts of performance of which Soyinka's play is in part one (on the English side) and Ishola's translation, another on the Yoruba side. To this extent, therefore, *Death and the King's Horseman* is, by implication (at the level of language use) appropriated partly by the English literary heritage. This is made more so by the fact that Soyinka relies extensively on western dramaturgic styles and modes. Apart from the use of English as a medium of verbal interchange in the play, the play relies on the use of western stage-set, lighting effects, stage movements, the masques, and other western-derived dramatic elements. Soyinka's training as a playwright in England is unmistakable in this regard. The same argument holds true for Akinwumi Ishola's *Iku Olokun-Esin*. For a start, Ishola signals his change of focus and emphasis right from the title of his play. Loosely translated, *Iku Olokun-Esin* means "the death of the Horseman". Whereas Soyinka focuses on Death and ..., Ishola thematises the death of the Horseman. There is a crucial difference here. While in Soyinka's play we are treated to the monkey-games and shenanigans of Elesin vis-à-vis the phenomenon of his ritual suicide, Ishola, although seemingly replicating the English original, wants us to

focus on the death of Elesin. The centrality of the individual ego, the preening protagonist is somewhat dwarfed in Soyinka's work. This is because Soyinka is more interested in problematizing Death, in looking at Death in the face and reducing it to a purposive and serviceable socio-cultural event. This humanization of Death in mythic terms appears to be Soyinka's concern.

Now coming to Akinwumi Ishola's *Iku Olokun-Esin*, we may want to ask, how faithful is his translation? Does it help fill in textual gaps, ideational silences, and sundry aporias? Does it uphold the original story as History in its Yoruba version? In short, are there any points of departure between the English original and the Yoruba translation? If there are any, are they in the areas of characterization, plotting, setting, authorial vision/ideology? Or, is it just a question of language use? Even so, to what extent may we claim that the translator has done justice to Wole Soyinka's work? Does the work in the original suffer in translation due to the strategy of too-faithful script fidelity adopted by Akinwumi Ishola? Conversely, does he rise beyond imaginative incompetence and difference to surpass the English original due to the fact that the story is now told in the "original" (i.e. Yoruba) language?

Before we go into any indepth comparative survey of the texts under analysis, it is proper that we outline the background historical details which inform the creation of *Death and the King's Horseman*. According to Wole Ogundele:

Oral history tells us that originally, the Olokun Esin (master of the Horse) did not have to die along with his king for any reason at all, political or metaphysical. The first Olokun Esin to die did so willingly. The reason, the oral historians say, was that particular Olokun Esin and the king were uncommon close friends. Such was the friendship that the Olokun Esin enjoyed all the rights and privileges that the king himself had, plus all the good things of life available in the empire. When the king died, this particular Olokun Esin thought that the only way to demonstrate his love and loyalty to his friend, the dead king, was to die, too. (56)

Inherent in this oral account given above, as Ogundele himself reveals, are the bold outlines of the warrior ethic in a heroic age (56) In

his book, *The History of the Yoruba*, the Rev. Samuel Johnson gives a vivid account of the actual ceremony (up to the end of the nineteenth century perhaps) and its contrasting moods. (56) Many people died to accompany the dead king to the ancestor world, until sometime after 1858, when the number was reduced to one, as was the real demand by the soon-to-die *olokun-esin* for any young lady who took his fancy (57).

The historian and the poet do not differ by writing in verse or prose (for the history of *Aeraditus* could be put in verse and yet it would be nonetheless history whether with meter or without meter), but they differ in that the historian writes of what has happened and the poet of what might happen. Hence poetry (or the entire realm of literature, for that matter) is more philosophical and more serious than history for poetry deals more with things in a universal way, but history with each thing for itself. (130)

Following this Aristotelian waiver, we may choose not to take Soyinka or any writer to task for standing History on its head in order to create a fictive *magnum opus* with some ideological ends in mind. In *Death and King's Horseman*, Soyinka tells therefore of the tragic career of Elesin Oba who plunges his race into the abyss of the great void due to his hamartia: when the play opens, the *Alaafin* is long dead and buried. And as "tradition" demands, Elesin Oba is supposed to join him in the afterlife in ritual self-immolation. This is actually set in motion at the outset of the play. Strategically, the dramatic action takes place in a marketplace. In a characteristically perspicacious exposé of the play, Adebayo Williams remarks:

*Death and the King's Horseman* opens with a grand panorama of the Yoruba marketplace. Here, Soyinka deploys all his artistic power to paint a picture of grandeur and vitality. According to an old Yoruba saying, "The world is a marketplace; heaven is home". Apart from its obvious economic importance, the market occupies a signal cultural, political and spiritual position in the Yoruba cosmos. First, it is a site of political and cultural ferment. Second, it doubles as that numinous zone in which the distinction between the world of the dead and that of the living is abolished. The ancient Yoruba saying captures this crucial contiguity. In most Yoruba towns, the evening market is regarded as

the most important, and before the advent of electricity, it was a most eerie sight indeed. Moreover, the market serves as a barometer for the spiritual and psychic health of the community (77).

Elesin Oba, in a progressively absorbing and enthralling trance-dance and possession, dances through the market (a symbolization of the Yoruba universe or cosmos), pursued by his drummers, praise singer and a crowd of admiring women. Along the line, he rivets his eyes on a ravishingly beautiful damsel and enthuses.

Elesin:.... In all my life

As Horseman of the king, the juiciest  
Fruit on every tree was mine. I saw,  
I touched, I wooed, rarely was the answer No.  
The honour of my place, the veneration I  
Received in the eye of man and woman  
prospered my suit and played havoc with my  
sleeping hours... (158).

Elesin soon has his way with *Iyaloja* whose son is the would-be groom of the girl. Elesin goes offstage to consummate his private lust, thus impregnating the girl. This act effectively truncates his deeply numinous *dans macabre*, thereby rendering him completely human; rooted in the mundanities of everyday life. Upon learning of the impending ritual suicide of Elesin, the British Colonial District Officer, Simon Pilkings, orders that Elesin be arrested and put under protective custody. As far as the white man is concerned, he is doing Elesin a good turn. But the truth is that he (District Officer) has committed an abominable act by desecrating the person of Elesin and desacralising the entire project with his misplaced, crudely interventionist Christian sympathy. This delay spells disaster not only for Elesin, the human vehicle of racial destiny, but for the entire Yoruba people. *Olunde*, his been-to son dies in his stead, thus violently violating tradition. Elesin in shame strangles himself.

That is the plot of *Death and the King's Horseman*. Akinwumi Ishola's *Iku Olokun Esin* also replicates the English original in a near-faithful fashion, almost word-for-word translation. Ishola does not only translate the play proper, he also translates the prefatory notes, et cetera. Ordinarily, the Yoruba language is sheer poetry when deployed in casual communicative event. This intense poetic energy and flavour of the

language becomes all the more powerful and grand and ritualistically mellifluous when a trained singer of tales goes to work, belaboring the idiom to yield its plenum. In the English original, Soyinka uses poetry throughout: the formality of verse imbues the play with ritual incantatoriness and epigrammatic gravity. The simulation of mood and evocation of atmosphere appropriate for the business at hand is engendered by the use of such value-laden lexical items as voyage, passage, traveler, boulders, void, transition, and so forth. Aristotle in his *Poetics*, has prescribed that serious issues of human fate such as life and death, love, war, loss and evil be rendered in poetry while the trivia of human foibles be recorded in prosaic language. Consequently, Soyinka's drama and its Yoruba version dramatize the issue of death, the ultimate violator of life, and, as such, do so in poetic language. Adebayo Williams has remarked on the seductiveness of Soyinka's poetic exuberance, which "wheedles" the critic into acquiescing to his thesis uncritically (108). In one of his essays, Biodun Jeyifo has equally commented on what he terms "polysemic overcoding" (133) in Soyinka's work.

In more respects than one, Soyinka's avowed love of poetic language parallels the traditional bard's penchant for felicity of phrasing, beautiful turns of phrase and what Samuel Johnson has called "happiness of language". We find this in evidence in Akinwumi Ishola's *Iku Olokun-Esin*. Here is a sample:

AKIGBE: Taa ni yoo so pe oun o mo o, ejo-n-gboro  
 ni gbogbo koro-koro oja! Idun tii soro lori eni, alaje  
 dupe! Nigba ti won ka a mo ori aburo iyawo e. o  
 ni ki won o se oun jeje, sebi oun n doable fun un ni  
 bi ana rere ti i se ode ti i so apa etu re mobadi,  
 bo duro... (17)

English Version

PRAISE-SINGER: Who would deny your reputation, snake-on-the-loose in dark passages of the market! Bed-bug who wages war on the mat and receives the thanks of the vanquished!  
 When caught with his bride's own sister he protested – but I was only prostrating

myself to her as becomes a grateful in-law.... (158) ]

As Ishola himself has stated in many of his writings, the mark of creative ingenuity of the Yoruba writer lies in his dexterous manipulation of the resources of language.

It is the sum total of a writer's linguistic competence, his artistic patience and ability to achieve lucidity without boredom, plus his realization that a high degree of elegance and pregnant linguistic implications are essential in a work of art, that determines his literary style. (86)

Also, in emphasizing the need for a writer to have keen ears for the poetic feel of a language, Ishola goes to great lengths in a chapter titled "The Use of Language" contained in his useful book *The Modern Yoruba Novel: An Analysis of the Writer's Art*, to explore various semantics-aesthetic significances of such categories as tone, proverb, humour, Yoruba oral love, folksongs and so on. For instance.

Gbangba, godogba, raari, kelebo, ki se agba, ogbon ori ni.

(mere size and heaviness is not enough to be a leader, it requires wisdom). (86)

Ishola goes on to tell us that "the predominant use of the low tone on the words suggests great size and weight that may impede swift action that is required in a good leader. As a syllable-stressed language, Yoruba relies extensively on tone, and various poetic devices such as wordplay, onomatopoeia, ideophones, tonal counterpoint and parallelism are deployed to serve the purpose of tone (86). According to Niyi Osundare Nigerian poetry,

In the realm of incantatory poetry, it is words – or rather their sounding – which provoke the universal sympathies, make things happen or unhappen, intrude the chanter's will upon the universe of the seen and unseen, and convert that will into a demand and that demand into a command which insists on fulfillment (9).

Osundare avers further:

Sounding is meaning, meaning is sounding. The music

which emanates from the soul of words is an inalienable part of the beauty of the tongue. Tone is the power-point, the enabling element in a Yoruba communicative event (9).

It is against this background that we can begin to appreciate the full range of the debt that the dramatist owes the traditional oral heritage. Even though Soyinka wrote in English, we may begin to do a proper assessment of how much of Yoruba resources inform his style and technique. The traditional culture is so rich and indeed, inexhaustible in literary material so much so that the modern writer does no more than fit the existing materials into his own hardly original mould. So the creative artist cannot but utilize the existing corpus of artistic matter and manner. By the same token, therefore, both Soyinka and Ishola mainly worked within existing artistic traditions, for Soyinka both indigenous and foreign traditions, and, for Ishola, largely native oral/written heritage. What is said of the traditional oral artist and his scribal counterpart (i.e. the novelist writing in Yoruba) is equally true of Soyinka: "it is not enough to tell a good story. The story must be well told. As good artists, they use multi-dimensional cultural associations to crystallize obscure ideas. They use varying linguistic patterns of which the deliberate evocation of similarities through parallel structures, through the use of simile, the special use of proverbs and idioms are noteworthy"(98).

It is important to stress here that both Soyinka and Ishola hail from Yorubaland and both deploy extensively rhetorical and stylistic resources of traditional Yoruba oral poetry such as *oriki* (panegyric/heroic praise chants), *Ijala* (hunters' chants in praise of the sylvan universe and the denizens therein), *rara* (the poetry of the talking drum), *ofo* (incantatory poetry), *Ifa* divinatory poetry, *esa* (the poetry of egungun) and so on. For example, most of Elesin oba's and Praise Singer's speeches are incantatory poetry, and these are accompanied most of the time by drumming and songs. The NOT-IN Bird sequence is a classic of sheer panegyricizing. And, the mere fact that the play (and its Yoruba version) are dealing with the subject of death makes the use of *esa* inevitable. In the words of Bimpe Aboyade, "*Death and the King's Horseman* reads like one piece of poetry, whose every line is a lesson in understanding"(10). In order for the audience to be able to elicit "the

play's threnodic essence"; they need to plumb the depths of the music that is Yoruba communicative idiom. "The dominant cadence in the play, though written in English, is unmistakably Yoruba, not of Yoruba everyday speech but of Yoruba poetry"(10). Much earlier in this paper, we emphasized the rootedness of Soyinka's art and craft in his native Yoruba culture. Thus, the modern playwright goes beyond mere translation in his relentless search for forms, modes and technique. He actually engages in all manner of poetic mediation. For Soyinka, he does it so effortlessly and skillfully that even a popular saying reads like a mint-new invention. He surpasses his fellow playwright Ola Rotimi in this regard, because the latter does not seem to make any bones about revealing the source(s) of his creative work. Usually, something is lost and gained in this kind of exchange. But the general impression is that Soyinka's theatre is the better for it, and, even more so, considering the imperatives of reaching a wider audience.

Significantly, the business of the ritual suicide is transacted between Elesin and his praise singer all through the play, as both seem to be felicitously locked in a delectably spectacular duel of song, riddle and dance. The praise singer who is armed with the patronyms and cognomens of Olokun-Esin tricks him out in billowing toga of adulation and the King's Horseman himself, "a man of enormous vitality" who impresses us with his "infectious enjoyment of life" responds in like vein. According to Olokun-iyó in the play, Elesin's riddles are "not merely the nut in the kernel that breaks human teeth, he also buries the kernel in hot embers and dares a man's fingers to draw it out" (150). Commenting on Soyinka's use of Yoruba verbal arts, Biodun Jeyifo stresses that "Soyinka... looked to a variety of resources and models from our traditional performing arts: music, dance, song, ritual and ceremonial enactments, gestural conceits derived from observed modes of bodily and verbal communication".(133) Jeyifo further notes that the mythopoeic dramatist uses these "traditional" resources "as simultaneous vehicles of performance, thematic exploration and integrated textual matter".(133) Little wonder, then, that the play's theme of death is appropriately couched in a language which marvelously evokes the near eerie feel of death. This is further accentuated by the fancy-dress ball at the Pilkings. Bimpe Aboyade claims that *Death and the King's Horseman* is a play which derives its aura from the ancestral

masque”(13). Apart from the fact that the wearing of the egungun get-up for fun by the Pilkingses symbolizes the tragic desecration of the ancestral masque, the mere fact that this sub-plot parallels the main one of ritual self-immolation is instructive. Tied closely to the theme of death in *Iku Olokun-Esin* (and its original) is the whole notion of honour. Elesin puts it succinctly when he intones, “Life is honour. Whence honour ends, life ends”. But in the light of the play, Elesin does not seem to take himself seriously when he pays lip service to the question of honour. He seemingly deploys the armature of proverbial wisdom to railroad himself into the lap of fortune and pleasure. His is the quintessential prevarication and doublespeak. Compare him to Iyaloja and Olunde, and one has a self-contradicting chameleon. Be that as it may, there is a sense in which Elesin is the metaphor of his socio-cultural milieu. According to Bayo Williams, “...It is an attempt to counterpose the notion of personal and public honour in the ancient Yoruba Kingdom of Oyo as seen in the tragic career of its principal custodian of culture against the arrogance and chauvinism of the colonial power before whose might that empire finally crumbles, together with its notion of honour.”(118)

Clearly, the dynamics of honour in the ancient Oyo Kingdom were earthed in patriarchal and feudalist paradigms whose substance rested on the backs of plebeians, and other social underclasses. Thus, this local feudal class was booted out of public relevance and was replaced by the white man. It is this somber scenario that Elesin faces as he is called upon to fulfil himself in auto-negation.

The paradox of *Death and the King's Horseman* is that in looking for an enduring myth to combat the ideologists of colonialism, Soyinka stumbles on a great historical truth. Whatever the imperfections of the ancient Oyo Kingdom, the tragedy of Elesin Oba presents a collective tragedy(118).

This is the opinion of Williams. But we beg to differ here. The self-immolation of the Olokun-Esin was, according to oral sources, self-imposed, a classic instance of fortuitous self-abnegation. That a personal whim eventually ossified into custom is one of the curious ways of the world. If the unfortunate footsie-play of “the last of the modicums” spells the death knell for this custom, so be it. That the personal tragedy

of one notable person is the tragedy of all can hardly stand up in court.

On his own part, Wole Ogundele tends to hold the same opinion as Williams with regard to the metonymic role of Elesin: “A conventional reading of the play would blame Elesin alone for his failure to die. This is to view the play purely as a ritual performance in which the celebrant-protagonist allowed his attention to be fatally diverted... Rather, the play as a whole is more concerned with the inevitability of that failure – plus its causes and effects than with finding a villain. This reading of the play as tragic drama therefore shows that Elesin’s character and action up to the point when he should have died and his inability to die are consistent with each other, and that this consistency is a revelation of the ambiguities and shortcomings of his culture at this point in history. He is as much an effect of that culture as he is a cause of its smashing “on boulders of the great void”(160). One thing is clear in what Ogundele has remarked, and that is the dramaturg’s selective expropriation of the creative resources of History. The artistic integrity of Soyinka’s (and Akinwumi Ishola’s) histrionic vision should be of signal importance to us here:

Praise Singer: Elesin, we placed the reins of the world in your hands yet you watched it plunge over the edge of the bitter precipice... [218]

And when Elesin dithers and hesitates, Olunde, his son, dies in his place, thus putting his father to shame. And Iyaloja lashes out at Elesin oba:

Iyaloja: There lies the honour of your household and of our race. Because he could not bear to let honour fly out of doors, he stopped it with his life. The son has proved the father Elesin, and there is nothing left in your mouth to gnash but infant gum. [218]

Elesin eventually strangles himself in a desperate bid to redeem whatever is left of his personal and, by extension racial honour. Anyway, that is what the play would have us believe. Elesin’s death, therefore, puts the final nail to the coffin of the dying aristocratic, feudal social order and effectively puts paid to the age-old practice of ritual self-sacrifice. In Akinwumi Ishola’s *Iku Olokun-Esin*, this is how Iyaloja puts it to the pregnant girl.

[o kaju si IYAWO to fi duro loju kan naa lataaro]  
omo

[Omobinrin naa mu yeepe die nile, o rora rin bo  
sinu yara atimo, O si pa oju Olokun-Esin de. O  
waa da erupe die si ori ipenpeju kookan, o si  
tunjade]

Bayii, e gbagbe eni to ti ka, e gbegbe eni to wa  
laaye papaa. Inu omo ti won o tii bi ni ki e maa ro  
[ 105]

Child

[The girl takes up a little earth, walks calmly into  
the cell and closes ELESIN'S eyes. She then pours  
some earth over each eyelid and comes out again]  
Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn  
your mind only to the unborn. [219]

In keeping with the traditional Yoruba *weltanschauung* in which human existence is perceived to be in phases: the dead, the living, the unborn and the "diatonic realm" – Wole Soyinka draws our attention to the third phase, i.e., the unborn. But, then, the unborn which is a product of the past (the dead) and the present (the living, i.e. the BRIDE) is an "unknown" quantity, a mixed bag of items, baffling and complicated in its protean profiles and possibilities. This metaphor of the future comes through in this play on the mundane level of existential cognizing as a *Deus Ex Machina* of some sort, the redeeming fissure in the necropolistic chorister of history. And since history is a never-ending continuum, contemporary experience bears eloquent testimony to the fallout of that costal encounter between Elesin and Bride. The present which is a concatenation of sundry tensions, antinomies, conflicts, disasters and apocalyptic harrows confirms the Ona of its percentage. Indeed, the past has continued to be a millstone, a false burden, an albatross hanging around our neck as a people, both on the national and continental levels. And, as Wole Soyinka argues in his Independence play *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), the past will always dog the present, or, to put it differently, History will continue to follow "the recurrent cycle of human stupidity". The future, as a matter of fact, is doubly spectral as a result of the current neo-colonizing agenda of the west and the internal contradictions within the African nation-state itself. Thus, Afropessimism

can only beckon to Apocalypse in the scheme of things.

In this paper we have tried to describe the function, nature and the place of History in Soyinka's play and its Yoruba translation as well as critique the relative extent of fidelity in Ishola's translation. And we have discovered that Ishola's play is a faithful translation of the English original. The implication of this is that the Yoruba play restores to the Yoruba people their artistic patrimony, which the English fare may have alienated them from. The crusade for mother-tongue literature is greatly promoted by this laudable feat. It is hoped that other African writers competent in their indigenous tongues will follow Ishola's example. This will go a long way in fostering a sense of pride and belonging in our increasingly westernized young people. Translation studies should be set up in our learning institutions to equip scholars interested in the field with the requisite expertise. By so doing, more people will be exposed to the cornucopia of African culture and, in Ishola's words, be made to "taste the fruits of the literary achievements their societies have generated".

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## LANGUAGE, IDENTITY AND CHARACTERISATION IN SELECTED NIGERIAN PLAYS

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### INTRODUCTION

The multilingual or bilingual skills of the average African writer may be said to be one of the benefits of the colonial encounter, termed "ambiguous blessing" by Bjornson (19). This is evident in the ability of the continent's writers to communicate in more than one language. Apart from the language of the colonial exploiter, there are the indigenous languages of the nationalities that were brought into the ambit of colonial control. In Nigeria, which was colonised by the British, the official language was and is English. As citizens went through western education the English language was imposed and accepted as a mode of instruction in primary and secondary schools. It was also the language of the newly emergent civil service, the new elite. Bjornson writes that "the language of high culture was the language of the European colonizer" (12) in the territories. The ability to communicate in the English language placed one on a high social and cultural pedestal. Significantly, the writers did not jettison their mother tongues. Indeed, in the post-independence years, while the military and civilian administrations attempted to forge a national identity for Nigerians, they did not make repudiation of indigenous languages one of their strategies. Indeed, they recognised three languages in official and state communication. At the level of the states, this practice was also adopted, though with emphasis on languages drawn from the immediate environment.

In order to demonstrate some of the assertions and arguments which we have made in this essay we have selected four major works by three Nigerian playwrights. These are *Ozidi* by J.P. Clark; *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* by Ola Rotimi, *Death and the King's Horseman* and *The Lion and the Jewel* by Wole Soyinka. It is the view of this writer that these playwrights have used language to create authentic African characters by giving them identities that are distinctly autochthonous.