



The Dramaturgical Function of Songs and Chants in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*: A Performance-Psychoanalytic Reading

Olaide Morolayo, BABALOLA

Department of English and Literary Studies, Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science, and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the dramaturgical function of chants in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, investigating how these oral performance elements contribute to plot advancement, character development, and cultural resistance. While previous scholarship has emphasised the play's ritual content and cultural symbolism, few have examined the specific narrative and psychological work performed by chant as a dramatic device. Grounded in Richard Schechner's Performance Theory and psychoanalytic criticism, the study conducts a close textual analysis of selected chants by Elesin Oba, the Praise-Singer, and the market women. These chants are analysed for their symbolic structure, emotional subtext, and cultural meaning. Findings reveal that chant in the play functions not only to externalise internal conflicts, such as Elesin's fear and ambivalence toward death, but also to assert Yoruba cosmology in defiance of colonial disruption. Chants operate as vehicles of ritual memory, dramatising the tension between communal duty and personal desire, and between cultural continuity and historical rupture. The study concludes that Soyinka's use of chant transforms performance into both psychological exposition and cultural resistance. Far from being ornamental, chant emerges as a central structuring device in the dramatic logic of the play, underscoring the tragic consequences of disrupted ritual and failed transcendence.

Keywords: Wole Soyinka; *Death and the King's Horseman*; Song, chant; dramaturgy; Yoruba cosmology; ritual performance; cultural resistance; postcolonial theatre

INTRODUCTION

Oral traditions, chants, and folklore form an integral part of Yoruba heritage, shaping cultural expressions and preserving historical narratives. The vibrancy and emotional resonance of Yoruba chants and songs cannot be overstated (Oni, 2019). Beier (1950) emphasises this centrality, asserting that "there is no occasion in Yorùbá life that is not accompanied by songs" (p.21). Similarly, Adéòsun (2015) highlights how songs serve as tools for expression, stating, "Most literary scholars agree that song is very important in making peoples' views known" (p.2). These oral traditions preserve folklore, praise heroic deeds, and transmit moral values, ensuring cultural continuity across generations.

Yoruba chants and songs serve multifaceted purposes, including praise, storytelling, and social commentary. For instance, chants are used to provoke emotions, trace genealogies ("Oriki"), and even invoke spiritual powers in religious practices (Adebowale, 2021). Songs complement these chants, providing moral lessons, entertainment, and reflections on socio-political issues (Lasisi, 2012). Accompanied by drums, gongs, and clapping, Yoruba songs embody a dynamic mode of communication that fosters social interaction, entertainment, and cultural education (Sotimirin, 2020).

Wole Soyinka, one of Nigeria's foremost playwrights, integrates Yoruba cultural elements into his literary works, enriching them with chants, proverbs, and praise epithets (Ifatimehin, 2017). His celebrated play *Death and the King's Horseman* exemplifies this cultural richness. The play centres on Elesin Oba, tasked with



performing ritual suicide to accompany his deceased king into the afterlife. However, British colonial officer, Simon Pilkings intervenes, disrupting the ritual and its metaphysical significance (Migliavacca, 2018). Elesin's son, Olunde, ultimately sacrifices himself to restore spiritual balance, leaving Elesin disgraced and ostracised. Sudha (2004) observes that the play dramatises cultural clashes, colonialism, and personal tragedy, reflecting the tensions between Yoruba traditions and Western influences. Based on a historical event from 1946, Soyinka fictionalises elements to explore broader themes of cultural conflict and the consequences of disrupted rituals. Hemming (2009) praises the play's poetic mastery and philosophical depth, emphasising its resonance within Yoruba culture.

Death and the King's Horseman presents Soyinka's expertise in Yoruba heritage, incorporating traditional ceremonies, beliefs, and rituals (Rubin, 2016). The play employs songs, chants, and dances to enhance dramatic expression and audience engagement. Bamidele (2019) argues that in Yoruba performances, music and dance sustain audience interest and add depth to dramatic intentions. Songs often express sentiments that cannot be conveyed through ordinary speech, making them vital elements of performance. This study, therefore, among other things, investigates the use, as well as significance of song and chants in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*.

Many scholarly papers have been published on Soyinka's drama and poetry such as O. Ogunba and A. Irele (1978) O. Adejare (1992), A. O. Dasylva (2004), I. Odebode (2005), I. E. Olaosun (2005), G. Karimi (2015), F. K. Megbowon and C. Uwah (2017), T. Gnanasekaran (2018) and M. A. Aremu (2022). Most of these works centre on meaning and significances of Soyinka's drama. For instance, M. A. Aremu (2015) studies the pragmatics in Nigerianisms in Soyinka's DKH, while Olaosun (2005) explains the style and meaning in Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest*. Odebode (2005) studies the pragma- sociolinguistic use of names and nicknames in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, Aremu (2008) studies the pragmatic presupposition in proverbs used in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, while Aremu (2018) examines the conceptual mappings in participants' conversation exchanges in the play. Karimi (2015) examined the language and Yoruba rituals in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, Megbowon and Uwah (2017) investigated the aesthetics of Yoruba Culture in the play while Gnanasekaran (2018) focused on Western Cultural Beliefs in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. However, despite these extensive studies, there is a noticeable gap in the exploration of the significance of songs and chants in *Death and the King's Horseman*. While Dasylva (2004) analyses the meaning and significance of the "Not-I-Bird" song and Aremu (2022) offers a stylistic analysis of Elesin-Oba's folkloric chant, little attention has been paid to how these songs and chants function in advancing the plot of the play. This study, therefore, investigates the functional role of chant and song in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, not merely as aesthetic embellishments, but as integral dramaturgical mechanisms that shape narrative progression, character psychology, and thematic structure. It specifically aims to examine how song and chants contribute to the advancement of the plot, to explore the ways in which they dramatise psychological conflict, particularly fear, repression, and internal ambivalence, and to assess how chant operates as a form of cultural resistance in the face of colonial intrusion

LITERATURE REVIEW

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (DKH) has been extensively studied for its rich deployment of Yoruba cultural aesthetics, ritual dramaturgy, and linguistic innovations. Scholars have particularly examined its themes of cultural clash, language use, non-verbal communication, and oral performance. However, there remains a critical gap regarding the specific dramaturgical function of songs and chants as plot-advancing mechanisms within the play. Aliyu (2021) examines the role of oral artists as social critics in DKH and *Mairogo*, focusing on the Praise-Singer as Elesin Oba's moral conscience. While Aliyu acknowledges that the Praise-Singer's warnings, often delivered in chant form, influence Elesin's actions, his analysis remains largely sociological rather than dramaturgical, emphasising the oral artist's societal role over the structural function of these chants in narrative progression. Similarly, Boluwaduro (2018), using Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), investigates character naming as a vessel for ideological expression but does not engage with musical or chanted expressions that similarly encode cultural and narrative meaning.



This oversight extends into foundational debates within African literary criticism regarding the play's tragic framework, particularly in relation to its internal ritual content and cultural symbolism. For instance, Williams (1993) interrogates the ritual mechanisms of the play, arguing that Elesin's failure is rooted in a crisis of the individual will and a profound historical transition within the Yoruba cosmos. While Williams brilliantly unpacks the ideological and philosophical tensions underpinning the tragedy, his macro-analytical focus centers on the socio-historical dynamics of colonial rupture rather than the micro-dramaturgical triggers—such as the shifting cadences of the market women's chants—that structurally precipitate Elesin's hesitation. Conversely, Ogundele (1994) shifts the critical lens toward the play's metaphysical and performative text, asserting that DKH operates primarily as a self-contained ritual archetype rather than a mere historical confrontation. Yet, even as Ogundele emphasizes the totalizing nature of Soyinka's ritual theater to explain its deep cultural symbolism, he treats these performance elements as holistic cultural expressions rather than isolating how specific songs and chants function as precise, scene-by-scene narrative and psychological drivers.

Alani (2016) applies New Historicism and Reception Theory to interpret DKH's multi-layered meanings, emphasising live performance's role in unpacking cultural themes such as ritual and colonial encounter. Though Alani acknowledges music and chants as performative elements, these are treated as aesthetic components rather than narrative drivers. In contrast, Sotimirin (2020) offers a closer analysis of music's role in Soyinka's and Osofisan's plays. Through ethnographic observation and comparative textual analysis, Sotimirin affirms that Soyinka incorporates Yoruba oral traditions, music, dance, and chant into total theatre dramaturgy. However, the study focuses predominantly on cultural preservation and identity reinforcement, giving less attention to how these elements specifically advance the plot's structure or influence character trajectories. Maduagwu (2018) explores non-verbal communication in DKH, particularly dance as a semiotic and narrative tool. While ritual dance and song often intersect in African ritual drama, Maduagwu's focus excludes verbal ritual forms like chant, leaving a conceptual gap in understanding the interplay between verbal and non-verbal semiotics in narrative movement. Similar limitations appear in works such as Odebunmi, Oloyede, and Adetunji (2010), as well as Melefa and Chukwumezie (2014), who analyse proverbs in DKH through pragmatic act theory. While these studies underscore the communicative power of culturally embedded language, they treat proverbs in isolation from songs and chants, which also carry pragmatic, action-inducing, and plot-relevant functions.

Aremu (2015) and Odebode (2016) respectively investigate Nigerianisms and ethnographic patterns in Soyinka's dramatic language, reinforcing the play's rootedness in Yoruba sociolinguistic realities. However, both studies overlook the dramaturgical importance of songs and chants as structured verbal acts with specific narrative consequences. Aluya and Kofoworola (2020) provide a comprehensive analysis of non-verbal communication, kinesics, haptics, proxemics, chronemics, demonstrating how Soyinka layers meaning through gesture and physical positioning. Yet, their analysis again bypasses songs and chants as active, plot-moving components of the performance text.

While these studies collectively illuminate key aspects of *Death and the King's Horseman*, from cultural symbolism and linguistic devices to performance semiotics, most of them prioritise cultural or aesthetic functions over structural dramaturgy. Furthermore, many adopt largely text-centred or ethnographic approaches without anchoring their analyses in broader performance theories such as Richard Schechner's (2003) *Performance Theory* or Erika Fischer-Lichte's (2008) *The Transformative Power of Performance*, which argue for the centrality of ritual elements, song, chant, dance, as not merely decorative but plot-integral features in performance texts. Despite growing scholarly interest in African ritual drama (Barber, 1997; Osundare, 2012), few studies have systematically examined how songs and chants function as narrative-driving devices in *Death and the King's Horseman*. This lacuna frames the rationale for the present study, which seeks to critically assess how Soyinka employs songs and chants not merely as cultural embellishments or repositories of Yoruba oral tradition, but as essential dramaturgical tools that shape character arcs, advance thematic concerns, and structurally move the plot forward. By integrating performance studies theory and African literary criticism, this research contributes both to the understanding of Soyinka's dramaturgy and to global conversations on the mechanics of ritual performance in theatre.



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws upon two complementary theoretical perspectives: Richard Schechner's (2003) *Performance Theory* and psychoanalytic literary theory, particularly Freudian and post-Freudian models of death anxiety and repression. These frameworks are instrumental in analysing how chants and songs in *Death and the King's Horseman* function not merely as cultural ornamentation but as active performative agents that structure dramatic progression and reveal psychological depth.

Schechner's Performance Theory is central to this study. His concept of "restored behaviour", the idea that actions performed in ritual and theatre are rehearsed behaviours drawn from a social repertoire, offers a useful lens for interpreting the repetitive, symbolic nature of Soyinka's chants. In the play, chants and songs are more than spoken lines; they are ritualised acts that embody cultural memory, dramatise social roles, and rehearse existential meaning. The theory also emphasises "transportation" and "transformation" as key elements of performance, allowing characters and audiences to transcend the immediate moment. Through chants such as Elesin's *Not-I-Bird*, the performative utterance transforms ordinary speech into ceremonial performance, suspending time and anchoring the character between life and death. The chants function as portals into symbolic worlds where ritual duty, identity, and fate are negotiated in performative terms.

Complementing this performative lens is a psychoanalytic framework rooted in the works of Sigmund Freud (1917), Ernest Becker (1973), and Irvin Yalom (1980). These theorists explore the human psyche's response to mortality, particularly how death anxiety, repression, and the denial of death shape behaviour. Elesin's hesitations, deflections, and symbolic speech acts are interpreted in this study as manifestations of repressed fear and subconscious conflict. His chants, filled with evasion, mockery, and mythologising, are treated not simply as dramatic content but as vehicles for psychological displacement. They dramatise the internal tension between the superego (duty) and the id (desire to live), thus providing insight into the character's eventual failure to fulfill ritual expectations.

Together, Performance Theory and Psychoanalytic Theory provide a dual lens through which the selected chants and songs can be analysed for their dramaturgical and psychological functions. Performance Theory enables a structural reading of how these oral elements function to advance the plot, while Psychoanalytic Theory unveils the internal conflicts and fears that animate the verbal performance. This hybrid approach allows the present study to foreground the intersection of ritual aesthetics and psychological depth, thereby enriching the critical understanding of Soyinka's dramaturgy.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, library-based research design appropriate for textual and performance-oriented literary analysis. Primary data is drawn from Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, focusing on selected songs and chants purposively chosen for their thematic relevance and narrative significance. Specifically, eight chants by the Praise-Singer, the Not-I-Bird chant by Elesin Oba, and a mockery song by the Market Women are analysed, with selections drawn from pages 9, 10, 11, 15, 17, 18, 19, 43, 74, and 75. These selections were identified through comprehensive close reading, ensuring representation of key scenes where plot development and character transformation intersect with oral performance elements.

The analytical process follows a structured four-stage pattern: first, close textual reading and transcription of chant and song segments; second, thematic categorization to identify motifs such as fear, duty, and transition; third, theoretical application using both performance and psychoanalytic models to interpret dramaturgical and psychological functions; and finally, cross-referencing with existing critical literature to ensure interpretive validity and scholarly alignment. This approach ensures methodological transparency and interpretive rigor while acknowledging inherent subjectivity in literary analysis. Although the study does not include live performance data, it uses performance theory to bridge textual analysis with dramaturgical considerations, offering insights into both literary and theatrical dimensions of Soyinka's play. Ethical concerns are minimal, as the research is based solely on published texts; however, interpretive sensitivity is maintained through cultural awareness and critical engagement with Yoruba ritual contexts.



DATA ANALYSIS

In Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, songs and chants function as vital dramaturgical devices that advance the plot, articulate psychological conflict, and embody the metaphysical and cultural stakes of ritual. The selected chants and song in the play are analysed to demonstrate how they function both narratively and ideologically, drawing from performance theory and symbolic interpretation.

Mortality and Fear

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Wole Soyinka explores the tension between ritual obligation and the instinctive human fear of death, dramatised most vividly through Elesin's performance of the "Not-I-Bird" chant in Act I. Far from being a lyrical flourish, this chant functions as a strategic act of deferral, what Schechner (2003) describes as "restored behaviour," where performance becomes a means of rehearsing emotion through culturally encoded gestures. Though Elesin enters the marketplace with the ceremonial dignity expected of the king's horseman, his chant reveals a latent anxiety about death. By projecting this anxiety through the voices of other archetypal figures, the farmer, the hunter, the courtesan; Elesin enacts what Freud (1917) might call displacement, shifting the burden of fear onto fictional others to avoid directly confronting his own mortality.

Death came calling.

Who does not know his rasp of reeds? A twilight whisper in the leaves before
The great araba³ falls? Did you hear it? Not I! swears the farmer. He snaps His
fingers round his head, abandons A hard-worn harvest and begins

A rapid dialogue with his legs....

'Not I,' shouts the fearless hunter, 'but , It's getting dark, and this night-lamp
Has leaked out all its oil. I think

It's best to go home and resume my hunt Another day.' But now he pauses,
suddenly Lets out a wail: 'Oh foolish mouth, calling Down a curse on your own
head! Your lamp Has leaked out all its oil, has it?'

The mouth of the courtesan barely.....

Opened wide enough to take a ha'penny ...

go-between instead: 'Tell him I'm ill: my period has come suddenly But not , - I
hope , my time.' (pg 10)

This opening image is both poetic and prophetic. The "twilight whisper" that precedes the fall of the araba (a sacred tree) is a metaphor for death's silent inevitability (Dasylva, 2004). Yet rather than claim the call of death, the chant is riddled with denials: "Not I!" swears the farmer; "Not I," mutters the hunter. Each speaker abandons their task, whether a harvest, a hunt, or a meeting under pretext, revealing a patterned retreat from death. For example, the farmer snaps his fingers and abandons his harvest; the hunter claims it is too dark to continue and postpones his hunt; the courtesan feigns illness to avoid meeting death. These characters are not merely incidental; they are psychic stand-ins for Elesin himself, each embodying a facet of his evasion.

Rather than confess his own fear, Elesin performs a communal tale of avoidance, dramatising hesitation within the safety of symbolic distance. This is not improvisation but a culturally "twice-behaved" behaviour (Schechner, 2003), where communal ritual masks personal rupture. Even the chant's tone, energetic, comic, and mimetic, functions as an ironic counterweight to the gravity of its subject (Sotimirin, 2020). Humour here is a defensive mechanism, converting dread into spectacle. The Yoruba proverb, "*When a child meets fear, he*



trembles,” is embodied not just in Elesin’s gestures, but in the very structure of the chant, which allows the trembling to occur indirectly, through story and dance. Although Elesin proclaims:

“I am the master of my fate.

My soul is eager.

I shall not turn aside.” (pg. 11)

This final proclamation may appear resolute, but coming after a string of narrative detours, it registers less as conviction and more as overcompensation (Gnanasekaran, 2018). The irony is sharp: the more Elesin asserts his readiness, the clearer his internal conflict becomes. The chant allows Soyinka to stage this psychological ambivalence within ritualised form. In Yoruba cosmology, death is a transition rather than an end; the king’s horseman’s ritual suicide is essential to maintain balance between the physical and spiritual realms. Elesin’s chant, therefore, is not just personal but cosmological in significance. His failure to fully embrace his fate threatens communal harmony.

Soyinka thus transforms mortality from a singular heroic gesture into a collective anxiety refracted through ritual. Elesin’s psychological deferral is not just a personal weakness but a symbolic failure of will, one structured by, but not redeemed by performance. Chant becomes a liminal space: neither confession nor denial, neither death nor life, but the suspension of resolve.

Ritual Obligation and the Weight of Tradition

In *Death and the King’s Horseman*, ritual duty is not merely personal, it is metaphysical, communal, and historically embedded. The expectation that Elesin Oba must commit ritual suicide following the king’s death is not just symbolic of loyalty but essential to maintaining the cosmological balance between the worlds of the living, the dead, and the unborn (Boluwaduro, 2018). Through chant and dialogue, particularly those of Elesin and the Praise-Singer, Soyinka explores how tradition articulates duty as both destiny and discipline. Yet, this same tradition is shown to be vulnerable to human frailty and temporal distraction.

In the “Not-I-Bird” chant, Elesin begins with confident theatricality, portraying various characters who deny death’s approach. But later in the chant, the speaker pivots:

‘Not I,’ shouts the fearless hunter, ‘but , It’s getting dark, and this
night-lamp Has leaked out all its oil. I think

It’s best to go home and resume my hunt Another day.’ But now
he pauses, suddenly Lets out a wail: ‘Oh foolish mouth, calling
Down a curse on your own head! Your lamp has leaked out all its
oil, has it?’

Rigid as the plinth of Orayan..... (pg 51)

The hunter, a conventional figure of duty and bravery, hesitates when confronted with death’s ambiguity. His concern for failing light metaphorically represents a **waning resolve**, a foreshadowing of Elesin’s own spiritual unpreparedness. The line “lets out a wail” marks a crack in the chant’s bravado, introducing an emotional register that betrays denial (Maduagwu, 2018). Through this allegorical layering, Elesin projects his internal tension onto symbolic stand-ins. Duty, though repeatedly asserted, is being subtly deferred.

Elsewhere, Elesin offers rhetorical self-reassurance:

My soul is eager.

I shall not turn aside (pg 7)



This line is declarative, but its placement after narrative detours and interruptions betrays anxiety. It is the language of a man convincing himself. Elesin has been prepared for his ritual death, since his young age. The people of the kingdom know his destiny and they trust him that he will save the honour of the community, which is laid upon him. And at the same time, they treat him as an Alaafin, that is ~~the~~ the King, from the day of King's death to the day he performs the ritual. It is their responsibility and honour to grant him all he needs. Elesin is aware of his duty. The **ritual certainty** that his role demands has already begun to give way to hesitation. Duty, in this context, is both asserted and evaded in the same breath, revealing the psychological cracks beneath ceremonial assurance.

The Praise-Singer, acting as ritual conscience, plays a crucial role in reinforcing the communal memory of duty. His chant on page 11 draws on natural metaphors to frame obligation as singular and inescapable:

There is only one home to the life of a river-mussel
there is only one home to the life of a tortoise
there is only one shell to the soul of man
there is only one world to the spirit of our race.
f that world leaves its course and smashes
on the boulders of the great void,
whose world will give us shelter? (Pg 11) [. . .]
The gourd you bear is not for shirking.
The gourd is not for setting down
At the first crossroad or wayside grove.
Only one river may know its contents. (Pg 17)

These chants encapsulate the cosmological weight of Elesin's task. In Yoruba worldview, the transition from life to the ancestral realm is not individual but generational. If the ritual breaks, the world is endangered (Melefa & Chukwumezie, 2014). The metaphor of a "gourd" not meant to be set down at a crossroads further symbolises unbroken spiritual continuity; Elesin must carry this burden to completion without deviation.

Yet, the Praise-Singer is not simply an advocate of orthodoxy. Praise-Singer's chants portray him as an observant character, quick to gauge the ever-changing mood of his patron. It is through him that we know that Elesin's mood has changed when he sees a beautiful young girl. He tries to play-off the attraction he sees in Elesin's eyes, though Elesin waves off the subtle distraction. His later chant (p. 18) becomes more urgent, more personal:

Elesin-Oba why do your eyes roll like a bush rat
who sees his fate like his father's spirit,
mirrored in the eye of a snake? (pg 18)

This animalistic imagery conveys suspicion, evasion, and fear. The Praise-Singer no longer praises; he interrogates. His function shifts from herald to monitor, from witness to accuser. The shift in tone reflects the changing emotional temperature of the ritual moment: what began as sacred obligation now teeters under the weight of human desire.

The Praise-Singer's final warning explicitly invokes the motif of gendered temptation:

They love to spoil you but be aware but beware. The
hands of women also weaken the unwary.... In their time the great
wars came and went, the little wars came and went; the white slavers
came and went, they took away the heart of our race, they bore away
the mind and muscle of our race. The city fell and was rebuilt; the city fell
and our people trudged through mountain and forest to found a new home
but — Elesin Oba do you hear me? (pg 52)



This chant does not simply reflect misogyny; it dramatises the danger of historical forgetting. The community, already wounded by colonial exploitation and cultural loss, cannot afford another rupture. The invocation of women as a symbolic threat aligns with broader Yoruba dramatic convention, where seduction is often depicted as a test of masculine resolve and spiritual strength (Megbowon & Uwah, 2017). As the King's Horseman, Elesin carries the weight of his community's spiritual well-being on his shoulders, and any deviation from his duty could have profound consequences for the entire cosmic order. The warning also underscores the deep tension between personal desire and communal obligation. While Elesin may feel drawn to the beauty or companionship of women, the Praise-Singer reminds him that indulging in such earthly distractions compromises his commitment to his sacred transition. This highlights the absolute self-discipline required of individuals who occupy positions of spiritual leadership within traditional Yoruba society. Ultimately, Elesin's moral weakness is portrayed not merely as a personal, carnal failure, but as a dangerous symptom of a disrupted ancestral rhythm.

What emerges across these chants is a layered treatment of duty. Elesin is positioned within a spiritual narrative that both elevates and confines him. His sense of obligation is not fictional; it is deeply internalised. Yet, his response to it is not unambiguous. The chants reveal that duty in Soyinka's drama is performative, pressurised, and contested. It is publicly announced, ritually reinforced, but privately fraught. Through the lyrical density of the chants and their embedded metaphors, Soyinka illustrates that tradition is not automatic; it must be actively upheld. And it is precisely at the moment when tradition demands full submission that Elesin, seduced by beauty and momentary pleasure, falters. The chants not only trace that faltering but make us hear its rhythm. In doing so, they advance the plot not through action, but through deepening tension, between what is expected, what is performed, and what ultimately collapses.

Chanting Betrayal and the Collapse of Communal Trust

In Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, the concept of duty is not merely social but metaphysical, rooted in the Yoruba belief that ritual completion sustains the cosmological balance of the world. Elesin Oba's refusal or inability to fulfill the sacred obligation of ritual suicide following the king's death constitutes not just personal failure, but a rupture in the communal and spiritual order (Olaosun (2005). Through the lyrical and accusatory chants of the Praise-Singer, Soyinka dramatises this betrayal with poetic gravity, transforming ritual failure into communal lament.

The Praise-Singer's chant following Elesin's hesitation is steeped in **reproach and mourning**, not only for the man but for what his failure represents. In a series of symbolic metaphors, the Praise-Singer recounts the offers of assistance he once extended to Elesin:

Elesin Oba! I call you by that name only this last time. Remember when I said, if you cannot come, tell my horse. (Pause.) What? I cannot hear you? I said, if you cannot come, whisper in the ears of my horse. Is your tongue severed from the roots Elesin? I can hear no response. I said, if there are boulders you cannot climb, mount my horse's back, this spotless black stallion, he'll bring you over them. (Pauses.) Elesin Oba, once you had a tongue that darted like a drummer's stick. I said, if you get lost my dog will track a path to me. My memory fails me but I think you replied: My feet have found the path, Alafin. (pg 8)

(The dirge rises and falls.)

The chant forms a kind of **ritual lament**, structured as both memory and indictment. Each symbol invoked, the horse as a spiritual vehicle, the dog as a loyal guide, the smock as a marker of masculine identity, and the drummer's stick as a voice of ritual rhythm, reflects the community's readiness to support Elesin's sacred duty. Their presence in the chant signals not only spiritual assistance but also cultural expectation. By failing despite these supports, Elesin disrupts the collective ritual order. Thus, the chant functions dramatically as both indictment and elegy for communal betrayal. The fact that Elesin failed to act despite all these symbolic resources suggests not external obstruction but **internal weakness**. His silence becomes a betrayal of memory, community, and cosmological expectation.



The chant's tone is not simply sorrowful but sarcastically elegiac:

But the hunter, laden with a slain buffalo,
stayed to root in the cricket's hole with his toes.

What now is left?

If there is a dearth of bats,

the pigeon must serve us for the offering. (pg 8)

This image of a hero turning from great game to trivial pursuit is an act of poetic humiliation. The Praise-Singer's metaphor, "*But the hunter, laden with a slain buffalo, stayed to root in the cricket's hole with his toes,*" delivers a profound poetic indictment of Elesin's failure. In Yoruba cosmology, the image of a hunter with a slain buffalo evokes ritual achievement and heroic fulfillment. The buffalo symbolises a weighty offering, suggesting that Elesin was spiritually prepared to complete his duty (Odebunmi, Oloyede, & Adetunji, 2010). However, his sudden shift from that noble task to a trivial pursuit, rooting in a cricket's hole, represents a grotesque inversion of values. It captures the dramatic fall from ritual dignity to sensual distraction. The cricket's hole, too small for such a mighty figure, symbolises pettiness, vanity, and a retreat into indecision. Elesin, once tasked with escorting the king to the afterlife, is reduced to a man distracted by flesh, pride, and hesitation. In Yoruba epistemology, such misalignment between cosmic role and personal action invites **dishonour**, not pity. The chant thus voices not only communal disappointment, but a metaphysical crisis: the failure to offer what tradition requires jeopardises the balance between the worlds. The Praise-Singer's lament becomes a ritual record of betrayal, and the metaphor of substitution underscores the erosion of spiritual integrity.

The consequences of Elesin's betrayal reverberate through the Praise-Singer's chant where accusation deepens into communal grief:

Elesin, we placed the reins of the world in your hands
yet you watched it plunge over the edge of the bitter precipice.
You sat with folded arms while evil strangers tilted
the world from its course and crashed it beyond the edge of emptiness
- you muttered, there is little that one man can do,
you left us floundering in a blind future.
Your heir has taken the burden on himself.
What the end will be, are not gods to tell.... (pg 75)

Here, Soyinka presents Elesin's inaction not as an isolated moral failure, but as the undoing of trust invested in him by generations. The phrase "evil strangers" implies colonial agents, but the chant makes clear that blame is internal, Elesin surrendered his agency before any interruption occurred. The rhetorical shift from "you" to "we" ("we placed the reins of the world in your hands") emphasises collective disappointment and the rupture of ancestral continuity.

Olunde's death, invoked indirectly in this chant, casts Elesin's failure in even starker terms:

*"This young shoot has poured its sap into the parent stalk...
and we know this is not the way of life."* (pg 52)

This image subverts the natural order. In Yoruba cosmology, the dead join the ancestors to make way for the living. But here, the son dies for the father, inverting generational flow. The imagery of the "sap" being returned to the stalk collapses life's regenerative rhythm. In failing to die, Elesin becomes what Soyinka terms "the dead-living", a man socially and spiritually voided.



The Praise-Singer does not merely condemn Elesin; he delivers a ritual curse disguised as lament. The cumulative effect of the chants is the symbolic erasure of Elesin's once-revered identity. No longer is he "Elesin Oba"; he becomes "the shadow," a man whose name will not echo in the realm of the ancestors.

Soyinka deepens the betrayal through ritual irony. Elesin's suicide at the end, prompted by the shock of seeing Olunde's body, is not redemptive. As Olu Obafemi (1996: 130) rightly observes, "it is not transcendental", not an act of cosmic rebalancing, but one of guilt and despair. He does not "cut the thread of life at the summons of the drum"; he does so at the sight of shame. By so doing, Olunde is, thus, the "favoured companion of the king" while his father Elesin will arrive "stained in dung" (p. 76). Through chant and silence, Soyinka dramatises how betrayal of duty leads not only to personal disgrace but to communal destabilization. The Praise-Singer's voice thus becomes the play's ritual memory, preserving the record of disloyalty so that future generations may hear, not just mourn, but understand. As Elesin fails to act, the chant shifts from affirmation to indictment, making audible the moral and spiritual rupture at the heart of the drama. In this way, the chant assumes a dual role: it functions as both ceremonial instrument and narrative conscience, embodying the collective voice that bears witness to Elesin's tragic fall from honour.

Chant as Resistance to Colonial Disruption

One of the central tensions in *Death and the King's Horseman* is the clash between colonial imposition and indigenous cultural autonomy. Soyinka dramatises this tension not merely through plot, but through the performative power of songs and chants, which function as vessels of cultural memory, resistance, and spiritual continuity. These oral expressions counter colonial epistemologies by affirming Yoruba identity, cosmology, and social order.

In the Praise-Singer's chant on page 10, Soyinka foregrounds a long arc of communal resilience:

In their time the great wars came and went,
the little wars came and went;
the white slavers came and went,
they took away the heart of our race,
they bore away the mind and muscle of our race.
The city fell and was rebuilt;
the city fell and our people trudged through mountain and forest to found a new home but – Elesin Oba
do you hear me?" (pg 10)

This chant is not simply historical recall; it is a ritual invocation of collective survival, situating the current crisis within a continuum of cultural resistance. The phrase "white slavers" directly names the colonial rupture, while the repeated image of rebuilding affirms the Yoruba capacity to withstand external assault. Dramaturgically, the chant functions as both a prelude to the ritual and a cultural protest, insisting that Elesin's sacrifice is not barbarism but an act of metaphysical continuity. His failure, therefore, risks not only communal shame but historical disinheritance.

The market women's satirical chant further extends this resistance into the public square:

Call: "Talo lawa o l'ogbeja o" / Res: "Kayi a l'ogbeja o"
("Who says we have no defender?" / "Stop it! We have a defender!")

Performed as they block Sergeant Amusa's colonial intrusion, this mockery song fuses oral tradition with political theatre. The call-and-response format, typical of Yoruba performance, becomes a mechanism of defiance. It mocks colonial authority while affirming communal agency (Alani, 2016). The physical gestures, placing girls on their backs and dancing around them, intensify the symbolic resistance: women protect the future, even as colonial masculinity (embodied by Amusa) is rendered impotent and laughable.

These gestures transform the marketplace into a ritual site of reclamation, where satire becomes spiritual weaponry. As Richard Schechner's performance theory suggests, such acts of "restored behaviour" allow



communities to reassert power through repetition and transformation. Here, chant and performance serve to re-center Yoruba cosmology in a colonial setting that seeks to erase it.

Later, the Praise-Singer delivers a dirge that links Elesin's failure directly to colonial interference:

"You sat with folded arms while evil strangers tilted the world from its course... Our world is tumbling in the void of strangers, Elesin." (pg 52)

The metaphor of the world "tilted" and "tumbling" captures the cosmological violence of colonization. Elesin's dereliction is not framed solely as personal weakness, but as collusion with imperial disruption. He allows the colonisers' intrusion to interrupt the sacred process, symbolised by his failure to "cut the thread of life at the summons of the drum." The drum here is not mere sound but a call to ancestral duty, a summons interrupted by colonial logic and internal doubt.

This betrayal is intensified by the symbolic inversion of generational roles. Olunde, the son, assumes the father's responsibility and commits ritual suicide, described metaphorically as "the young shoot pour[ing] its sap into the parent stalk." The reversal undermines the natural and spiritual order, leaving the community "floundering in a blind future." Through this lament, Soyinka critiques not only colonial incursion but also the erosion of indigenous leadership under pressure.

Thus, in *Death and the King's Horseman*, songs and chants are not ornamental; they are performative acts of resistance, dramatising both the continuity and fragility of Yoruba culture under colonial threat. They critique imperial interference, expose internal betrayal, and ritualise collective memory. As Soyinka shows, it is not physical force but the rupture of rhythm, chant, and ritual that endangers the soul of a people.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that chants and songs in *Death and the King's Horseman* function as central dramaturgical tools, advancing the plot, externalising psychological tension, and reinforcing communal cosmology. By integrating Performance Theory and psychoanalytic perspectives, the analysis reveals that chants not only dramatise Elesin's internal conflict and ritual hesitation, but also voice the community's moral expectations and cultural memory. Chants such as those of the Praise-Singer transform performance into both critique and lament, elevating song beyond ornament into a performative narrative mechanism. The findings have broader implications for postcolonial performance studies, particularly in demonstrating how African oral forms function as both aesthetic structure and epistemological resistance. In the context of teaching Yoruba drama, this study offers a model for analysing how traditional performance practices are encoded within literary texts and dramatised in symbolic action. A key limitation of the study lies in its exclusive focus on textual analysis. The absence of live performance or audience-based reception data restricts insight into how chants are embodied in actual stagings, a gap that future research might address through performance ethnography or comparative production studies. Nonetheless, this study affirms that chant in Soyinka's work is not merely expressive but structural, an essential tool for navigating the tragic consequences of ritual, resistance, and human failure in colonial contexts.

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Biographical Note

Babalola Olaide Morolayo is a lecturer in the Department of English and Literary Studies at Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria. She earned her bachelor's degree in English Education from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and a Master's degree in English literature from Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State. Currently pursuing her PhD, Olaide is deeply passionate about expanding her knowledge and engaging in independent research. Her dedication to academic excellence and literary scholarship continues to shape her envolving career as a committed educator and researcher.