

# **Ancestors, Elders and Power in Traditional African Societies: Ogunyemi's *The Vow* and the Question of Suicide**

by

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## **Abstract**

The concern of this paper is centred on the idea that traditional rulers in African societies especially the Yoruba society of South west Nigeria adopt the functional role of ancestors as a tool to consolidate power. Thus, this paper uses the textual analysis as its methodology and concentrates its reference to an analysis of Wale Ogunyem's *The Vow* (1985) in an attempt to examine the phenomenon of suicide in *The Vow*, and ascertain that the protagonist character in the play and some of the elders, use the fiction of ancestral authority to impose their will on the people.

**Key Words:** Ancestors, elders, power, suicide

## **Introduction**

Ogunyemi's *The Vow*, a play written in 1985 inspired the production of a film which won the *African Arts* special award at the University of California, Los Angeles. It depicts the historical conditions that impacted upon the Yoruba people of south-west Nigeria. The play is a narrative of the pre and post-colonial discourses that became dominant themes of most Nigerian writers at the time. Just like Rotimi's *Kurunmi* (1971) and Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), Ogunyemi's *The Vow* also delves into the picture of representing either a clash of culture or an interference from the western culture into traditional African civilization. Moreover, despite the recommendations made by many writers/playwrights to critics against an interpretation of their works as a clash of cultures, the evidence and literary commentary on this subject remain prevalent, which cannot be ignored.

Hence, Ogunyemi made a cautionary remark in the introductory note to his play. And although he acknowledges the presence of the traditional beliefs and practices of the Yoruba, he proceeds to distort these traditions by invoking the presence of western culture, which in fact distorts the Yoruba tradition of the time. These contradictions with the interference of an alien culture introduced by the king's son in the play, lead to the complexities, as well as the conflicts in the play.

Of the major Nigerian authors, certainly among the dramatists, Wale Ogunyemi is perhaps among those whose dramatic works cries out to be given more sustained attention than it has attracted. The reasons it has been passed over so cursorily are themselves worth thinking about (passed over by critics and literary historians, that is, not by audiences, for whom Ogunyemi's plays represent a constant attraction). A lot of what Ogunyemi does is controversial, especially for a left-liberal or a non-chauvinist spectator; but there he is, a very visible presence in Nigerian theatre for over thirty years. Some of whose work, *Langbodo* (1979) for example has had a great impact on audiences in Nigeria and abroad and have been a major influence on younger dramatists and performers, however, his output has never been given the thorough examination it deserves (Dunton, 1993). It is in recognition of this, and the fact that suicide is represented in the play that encourages this writer to deal with the work of this Nigerian scholar, playwright and dramatist.

This paper therefore introduces Ogunyemi's dramaturgy, with particular attention to the textual presentation and representation of suicide in his play. Hence, a critical analysis of one of his plays titled *The Vow* (1985) to thus, draw attention to the central concern of suicide to understand the full significance of the act from a socio-cultural perspective, and how ancestors and elders constitute the consolidation of power in traditional societies. Furthermore, a re-interpretation of the theme of suicide as well as its reception among the Yoruba people of south-west Nigeria provides an understanding of how the phenomenon of suicide is received from a cultural history point of view by the people. To begin however, it is good to understand the ideology behind Ogunyemi's dramaturgy.

## **Wale Ogunyemi's Dramaturgy and Ideological Vision: An Exploration**

Ogunyemi can be classified loosely "as a transitional dramatist who occupies a critical watershed between populist vernacular folk drama pioneered by Ogunde and Adelugba" (Abolarin. 1996, p.32) as well as numerous Yoruba travelling theatre practitioners, including Duro Ladipo, Kola Ogunmola, Moses Olaiya etc. His works are also a "conspicuously exotic literary drama of English expression that is influenced by writers like Henshaw, Soyinka, and Clark, etc." (Abodurin, 1995, p.66). Indeed, Yerima (2000) describes Ogunyemi as representing the quintessential bridge between a literary academic dramatic experience and the so-called popular theatre.

Thus, Ogunyemi's plays take their inspiration from three main sources. First, the availability of historical material passed down to him remained a resource that he studied and made sense of. He also gathered knowledge from his grandmother who narrated most of the histories to him and that contributed to his rich literary works. A good example is found in his first full-length play, *The Scheme*, which was written in 1967. The play narrates the incident of the conflict between a chief, Odolofin, and the priestess of a goddess, an event which truly took place in 1947 and which Ogunyemi turned into a play (Obafemi, 2000). *The Scheme* vividly explores the intrigues and power of the Yoruba gods. It centres on Odolofin, a village chief who had earlier caused the Priestess of Esile, Lojuse, to kill her own cow as a sacrifice. During the festival of Ogun, the Yoruba god of Iron, the priestess is determined to have her revenge on Odolofin and accuses him of appropriating an effigy. The village elders forgive him and return the effigy to the shrine. The priestess, still determined to punish the chief, takes the effigy to his house again and the second time, elders believe the priestess, and punish the chief by evicting him. The goddess, on seeing what her priestess has done, is angered and the priestess goes mad and is humiliated.

A second source of influence of Ogunyemi's dramaturgy can be found in his academic experience and his encounter with the works of Shakespeare. His interest in Shakespeare lies mainly in the similarity he finds in his and Shakespeare's creative world of human emotions, and the use of historical material. He believed that Shakespeare's works, when well adapted (as in the productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1959) and *The Taming of the Shrew* (1959)) could be recreated to achieve some thematic relevance to Nigerian social life. Another reason for the appeal of Shakespeare's plays to him was that he had lived in the palace in his younger days at Igbajo and this enabled him to identify easily with the kings, their ambitions and tragic falls, which he must have witnessed. The influence of this inspired Ogunyemi, as far back as 1969 to translate Shakespeare's *Macbeth* into a Yoruba play titled *Aare Akogun*. In his adaptation, Ogunyemi relied on the 19<sup>th</sup> century Yoruba history of wars and great Yoruba warriors. The plot of *Macbeth* suited Ogunyemi's plot. The witches tell a great Yoruba general on his way back from war that he would rise to become the ruler of the Oyo Empire. Ambitious, he kills the ruling king and is later killed by the son of the late king. The presence of the witches and the ambitious kings and princes found in the Yoruba history enabled the audience to accept Ogunyemi's adaptation, which bore a realistic significance to the historical moment. (Ogbonna, 2013).

A third influence on Ogunyemi's dramaturgy can be located in the theatre itself. His ability to work with both English and Yoruba theatres has accounted for his prolificacy as a playwright. His experience at Oshogbo with the Yoruba professional theatre groups of Kola Ogunmola and Duro Ladipo, gave him more materials to work with. Writing for the theatre inspired him to write his own plays first in the Yoruba language and then to translate them into English. This linguistic versatility and flexibility lends his plays to widespread performances. (Azuonye, 2011) Ogunyemi's most remarkable demonstration and intellectual commitment to the Nigerian drama remain in his use of history in drama. The history of the Yorubas, myths and conflicts (both of values and cultures remain his copious primary source of materials).

The Yoruba, more than any other ethnic group in Nigeria, have a history of inter-ethnic wars. The life span of these was mainly from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries. It is these wars, the heroes of the wars and the lessons, which the wars teach that fascinated Ogunyemi in his writings. The plays where he explored in-depth in his handling of historical materials are *Ijaye war* (1970), *The Vow* and *Kiriji* (1976). The plays are concerned with the Yoruba Empire of the nineteenth century. The Ijaye war, the earlier of the two wars was fought from about 1859 to 1862, and the Kiriji War was from about 1877 to 1886. Both wars ended mainly due to the intervention of the colonialists who later annexed all the territories into an amalgamated Nigeria in 1914. In Ogunyemi's plays, drama and history become the means for a celebration and a re-telling of the history of the Yoruba people. In one of the interviews conducted by Yerima (1983) Ogunyemi responded that; "I write historical plays, because first, I want to attempt to capture and document the history of our people. And also, I want to [present] set history (into entertainment) [in an entertaining way]; to make it more attractive than it appears on the pages of the colonial chronicles".

History is reworked and recreated to form the basis of good drama. The *Ijaye War* and *Kiriji* are structurally different from one another. The Ijaye War is written, not in acts but in fourteen titled scenes. *Kiriji* is in two acts and an epilogue. This means that Wale Ogunyemi's dramaturgy is dynamic. It is the historical sequence, which dictates the plot of the plays. Collier (2012, p.60) refers to Ogunyemi's style as one of "epigrammatic sequence" which refers to the titling of each scene. The plot of Ogunyemi's plays are simple and his thematic preoccupation succinct. Most of the themes emphasize the need to uphold tradition and how it affects a man's principles. In *The Ijaye war*, the central plot surrounds the person of Kurunmi, a powerful warrior of Ijaye. The war starts over the disagreement on whether the son should succeed the father on the father's death. Alaafin of Oyo of which Ijaye is a vassal, dies. In addition, before his death, he demands that his son should succeed him. This is seen as a break with tradition as the son should be buried along with his father. The controversy as to whether or not the late king's son should ascend the throne sets the stage for the war that takes place in the play (Okoye, 2015).

In Ogunyemi's *Kiriji*, the plot centres on the Ibadan warriors who defeated Kurunmi in the Ijaye war. The play starts with a delayed uprising against strong Ibadan policies of vassal rule. The Ekitis are frightened of the officers of the law, called *Ajeles*, and imposed on them by the Ibadan rulers. The plays sub-plot indirectly features the Ekiti warrior, Fabunmi, whose dynamic and revolutionary spirit leads his people to a revolt against the Ibadans. The major theme is an advocacy for ethnic unity of the Yoruba, a theme that also resonates with the present political situation among the Yoruba people today.

The style of Ogunyemi's plays lies in the simplicity of his linguistic expression. Ogunyemi effectively translates from the Yoruba language to English. This attempt of a direct translation is qualified by Ogunyemi as 'Yorubanglish.' (Inegbe, 2010)

However, the art of translation in Ogunyemi's plays draws a critical comment from Adelugba (1976) who questions the grammatical usage and syntax in the dialogue in Ogunyemi's plays. Adelugba goes further to state that Ogunyemi is usually confronted with the problem of translating his Yoruba material into English. In some cases, 'correctness' of such English or Yoruba English translation does not appear as obvious as long as the meaning in Yoruba is reflected in the transposition.

The creative tendencies of Ogunyemi are therefore a culmination of many factors that are directly a product of what obtains in his society. His inspiration is far from personal but rather an influence from social and historical issues and how they affect his society, his culture and his tradition. It is in the same vein that *The Vow* provides both an historical and a cultural narrative of the Yoruba people and the complexes that interfered with their values and beliefs. It is important therefore to provide a synopsis of *The Vow* to enable an understanding of the story of the play and how it sets a background for the analysis in this paper.

### ***The Vow: A Synopsis***

Ogunyemi's play *The Vow*, is structured around the characters of the King (a natural ruler), Olori (the king's senior wife), Nike (the king's junior wife), Adubi (the king's son), Joy (Adubi's wife); Otunba, Jangun, Saba (chiefs), Mulundun (Ifa priest), Iranse (the king's attendant), Tola (a young woman betrothed to Kaka), Kaka (a young man, betrothed to Tola), Aperin (Tola's father), Okada I and II (palace policemen); Ifatoogun, Aminu, Osho (leaders of the townspeople), Boy (Aminu's son), Ghost (of the king's father) and the drummers and praise singers.

This is set in a palace chamber with the chiefs' visit in the early hours of the morning to pay homage to their king. They exchange pleasantries as custom demands. However, just as the pleasantries begin to take a happier dimension, Aminu and a group of community people bring word that the community is under attack by the people of Waya. Aminu creates a lot of pandemonium in the palace alongside his group who clamour for war to enable them to retaliate against what the people of Waya have done to them. Though the king expresses his sympathy, he makes it categorically clear that he does not need war. According to the king, war breeds more war and his time as king; he will not encourage any war but he would rather see how he can make peace.

The king goes to the shrine to consult with the ancestors especially with the spirit of his late father who he thinks died untimely and left many lands in the hands of the Waya people. He faults the spirit of his father for making such a grave decision, which has caused his people pain. The king makes it clear that, he will not make such decisions such as the one made by his late father, but rather, he will be consistent in his decision to foster stability in the kingdom.

The king swears to the ancestors that my “Yes shall be yes, and my No a rigid No, the day I go back on my word, let me die an instant death” (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.5). After swearing, he performs the rites and leaves the shrine but is quickly interrupted by Akoda. Akoda informs the king that he has a telegram from his son who informs of his coming.

The king summons all the elders of council and chiefs after receiving news of his son’s return from America. The specific purpose of the meeting scheduled by the king is to inquire from the elders which congratulatory gift is worthy for his son. The chiefs make several suggestions that range from building of a befitting house for the prince, purchase of expensive cars or organizing a glamorous party that will bring everyone together. However, despite the multiple suggestions brought forward by the chiefs, the king seems not to be satisfied and goes for the more traditional gift. For the king says; “the most appropriate congratulatory gift my heart desires for him, therefore is a wife.” (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.7) The choice of the king in choosing a bride for his son faces a degree of resistance from the chiefs who feel that such a decision does not align with the custom of the present age. However, the king defends his action as a customary and traditional act for a serving king to choose a bride for the man who is going to succeed him. The king therefore orders some of the chiefs especially Otunba to go and begin preparations to find a bride from the most beautiful girls in the community. In addition, drinks and lavish preparations and parties are scheduled to be organized for the party.

As the king waits for the selected bride to be brought, Akoda, one of the palace policemen enters with the news that the selected bride is betrothed to a man who would not allow her to be brought to the palace. The king is angered with this news and orders that the man be brought immediately. Kaka is arrested and brought before the king for daring to challenge his instructions. He is maltreated, cursed and sent by the king to be a slave to one of his farms. Despite Kaka’s pleas, the king refuses to honour them and sends him to prison as a lesson for any other person who tries to challenge his orders. In the king’s words he says; “I shall make an example of all those who disregard my orders.” (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.12).

The son of the king finally returns and the king is very happy. He summons the whole community from every level to welcome his long-awaited son. There are dances and a lot of merriment. However, Adubi, the king’s son returns with a woman whom the father tries to think is one of his son’s secretaries. However, on inquiry, Adubi openly tells his father that the woman is his wife that he married during his stay in America. The king is so outraged with his son that he admonishes his son telling him that he has already organized Tola as a bride for him as tradition demands and that he must take over the responsibility of being her husband. He completely dismisses the white woman brought by his son. This scenario causes a lot of disagreement between the king and his son. According to the king, “I consider it a bastard, the child of an improper marriage witnessed by bastards!” (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.22).

Some of the chiefs plead with the king to reconsider his decision but the king is adamant. According to Ogunba he says; “this is a man already married, not willing to be a polygamous husband. In addition, this is a girl, not married and betrothed. She will take no other and this makes the matter even simpler...” (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 24) The entire celebration ends in futility and everyone leaves the palace with mixed impressions due to the disagreements.

The king is now worried and begins to blame some of the chiefs who he feels were responsible for encouraging him to send his son to the white man’s land. For the king, the result of his son’s travel is the disobedience he has brought. One of the chiefs, Mulundun supports the king because according to him, if the king dies and his son Adubi is to succeed him, it will be culturally irresponsible for them to accept a foreign wife as the queen to the king. That will be going against the ways of their ancestors. However, other supporters to Adubi’s choice insist that, the choice of a bride is solely the preserve of the son. The king goes to the extent of consulting the gods and seeking possible ways of destroying the relationship between the son and his foreign wife. Though the magic administered to the king to effect the separation between his son and the white woman begins to prove effective, it later failed because of the king’s failure to heed to a particular instruction. Adubi finally returns to his senses and looks for his wife (Joy) whom he had sent away because of the charm used by his father to cause their separation.

The ghost of the king’s father appears to torment the palace due to the indecision of the king. The king’s wife, Olori pleads for forgiveness from the ghost because she was not consulted in the whole affair. Despite that, the king refuses to go back to his decision due to the promise he had made that his yes shall be yes and his no a rigid no. He would rather commit suicide than go against his decision and the earlier oath he had taken before the shrine. *End of play*

## **Ancestors, Elders, Power and the Question of Suicide in Perspective**

Ancestors in traditional African societies are considered as those dead persons who due to their powers or role transit to the world of the dead and transform into deities to commune with the living. When they become progenitors, they are vested with mystical powers and authority and become a central force in the lives of the living. They maintain a functional role in the world of the living especially to their kinsmen who are still living. To appease such ancestors there is a human need to offer sacrifices so as to maintain a good relationship with them; neglect is believed to bring serious punishment or disaster. Ancestors are believed to have close relationship with elders, relatives, kings etc. However, they do not have the same close relationship with every member of society or of every group. The relationship of ancestors’ especially African ancestors is structured, according to Beattie and Middleton (2013), through the elders of the king-group, and the elders’ authority is related to their close link to ancestors. One is presumably meant to conclude that the elders are the representatives of the ancestors and the mediators between them and the reparatives.

The importance of ancestors in African societies and in dramatic literature is not dependent on the role they play but on their status as an extension beyond death for the élite class. Within the perspective of Marxist reading (readings that use a socioeconomic analysis that analyzes class relations and societal conflict using a materialist interpretation of historical development and a dialectical view of social transformation), this ancestral creation or representation in literature as represented in *The Vow* is only a false consciousness created by the elites as a cultural conditioning on the proletariat to accept their position without protest. They then adopt the ancestral mechanism as a vehicle to maintain power.

In traditional Yoruba culture, it is believed that the death of a person is not the end of his existence. However, this belief has its limitations and is practicable only within the world of those who occupy positions such as kings, Obas, kinsmen and even elders. This cultural atmosphere created is only a language of the elite to deceive the peasants of the spiritual significance of their world. The elite however know that, the basis of reality is material, no spiritual reality exists. This is largely so because their belief places its emphasis on the fact that the death of a nobleman especially the king must be accompanied by his assistant or a member of the same class structure to accompany him to the land of the dead. In the land of the dead, it is believed that such a person will transform into a deity and become an ancestor that communes with the living. The belief does not recognise the life of the commoner as belonging to such a category or as being capable of facilitating the journey through the realms of transition nor of unifying the cosmic totality of the Yoruba universe. This scenario plays itself out in most fictional texts of Nigerian authors especially those of the Yoruba extraction of South-West Nigeria. In Soyinka's *Death and the King's horseman* (1975), the death of the king is expected according to tradition to be followed by a ritual suicide of his horseman Elesin who will accompany him to the afterlife where it is believed the soul of the king will be transformed into an ancestor. The plays of neither Soyinka, nor Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and many others consider the life of the common man as essential and important towards performing the sensitive role of ritual suicide nor honorific suicide. In Rotimi's *Kurunmi* (1971) the death of the king is expected to be followed by the suicide of his son Adelu to accompany him to the afterlife. Many other works emanating from this belief uphold the role or position of the ancestors to be the exclusive preserve for the upper class of society. In terms of consultation, the kings, elders, and Obas are usually delegated with the task to go and consult the ancestors on behalf of the ordinary people. In times of difficulties, war, famine or deaths, the kings, chiefs or Obas are seen to be the legitimate persons that can mediate with the ancestors. It is no wonder that, even in palaces of most of the traditional rulers in the Yoruba culture, they have shrines containing different gods who they consult at will and use them to threaten their personal offenders. The commoners have no direct access to the ancestors as do those who occupy the upper class. Elders and kings create for themselves political, traditional and spiritual superiority over those they govern. This superiority also translates to how they relate with the ancestors by distancing them from the 'ordinary' people.



Kobytoff in his article, *Ancestors and elders in Africa* expresses the view that;

... the ancestors are referred to as “moral paragons” in which case, they are custodians of public and traditional morality in their community. However, it is no longer true today that they are still virtuous. They are morally bankrupt as a result of the fact that some moral problems such as stealing, incest, sorcery, witchcraft, killings, maiming, disobedience, adultery, false oath, hatred and lots of others have assumed dangerous and unprecedented dimension. These moral problems which are supposed to attract sanctions by the ancestors are allowed to soar and remain unchecked (Kobytoff, 1971, p.129).

It becomes clear that the role of ancestors has a questionable effect in the sense that their ‘actions’ are inclined to what the kings, chiefs and elders want. More so, the effectiveness of ancestors or not seems to be defined by the type and moral character of the rulers ranging from elders, Obas, kings or chiefs. Traditional rulers assume a monopoly of relationship with the ancestors. Because of the close relationship they create, they further use it as a medium of cultural and spiritual oppression. They go to the extent of even determining what the ancestors must do and what punishment they can inflict on an offender.

The king in *The Vow* is obviously composed of and deeply enriched in some fundamental Marxist ideologies and beliefs. Historically speaking, Marxist believed capitalism would lead to greed, and uncontrollable consumerism. This perception can be connected to the King who has been utterly consumed, almost blinded by capitalist ideas, where affluence, power and social standing are perceived as most important to him. The king believes that his position provides the sufficient space to make un-patronising decisions even against all forms of communal rejection. When he makes the decision for a bride to be selected for his son in Act 1 scene 3 he states, “*I want a wife sought for him and whoever hates this idea, be he a friend, neighbour or a fellow citizen, despises me. I am a man of my word.*” (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.9). The king is so absorbed in his social standing and authority, that he loses sight of the implication of his choices and decision on the people he rules. Despite the fact that, whatever benefits he enjoys as the King is a product of the hard work of his community men and women who toil day and night, pay taxes and work as slaves, the king is removed from this reality. He states in a conversation with Saba,

**SABA:** With all the preparation involved, the huge sums of money to be spent, can all be done within a fortnight?

**KING:** Yes. It is trouble worth taking, money worth spending and money well spent is not money lost...Jagun, why do you wear a blank expression- blank as vacant distances- making your thoughts obscure to me? Can I take it as an expression of opposition to my wish?

**JAGUN:** No, Kabiyesi. I am well disposed towards your proposal. Ask me to bring any girl, and in a trice I will. Your orders are the rules of my existence. (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.9)

The King seems to have a distorted perception of reality. He is rather pre-occupied and literally obsessed with not losing grip of his authority as the leader of the people. His confrontation to Jagun as a potential opposition to his decision is quickly reverted by Jagun who makes it clear that, “*Your orders are the rules of my existence.*” It is clear in the continuing parts of the play that the idea of a would be wife for the King’s son is purely his idea and somewhat of his own illusion. The king translates his material possession, social status and authority to be directly related to happiness and loyalty. The play however brings to light the shallowness and superficiality that lie within his kingdom. Marxism (a method of socioeconomic analysis that analyzes class relations and societal conflict using a materialist interpretation of historical development and a dialectical view of social transformation) is often related to the corruptness of capitalism and within this capitalist cycle, growing consumerism and obsession over materialistic ideals lead to its own destruction. The king follows a similar path, where his obsession with material possessions, economic success, and social standing, pride and authority lead to his own destruction and ultimately his suicide. His suicide is a product of the revolutionary attitudes and idealistic rejection of the people to his un-cut decisions.

Furthermore, in Ogunyemi’s *The Vow*, the king adopts the powers of the ancestors as an instrument to intimidate the people who seem to go against his will. Apart from oppressing them with his position as king, he invokes the powers of the ancestors to deal with any offender of his will. The conversation between the King and Kaka reveals this;

**KING:** Now tell me, who are you? What pushed you into thorns? What you did, could make me slash off your ears and give them to you to chew! Where is your pride? What pride has the dog when it comes to tiger hunting?

**KAKA:** Mercy!

**KING:** My ancestors would have removed your lips for having the mouth to challenge his authority; would have slashed off the eyelids, which shaded the eyes, that judged the beauty of a girl who attracted a king’s fancy; and would have castrated you for disrespect. (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.13)

The conversation that ensues between the king and his subject demonstrates the level of disparity that exists in the relationship of the rulers and the subjects. Despite ‘Kaka’s plea the king proceeds by unleashing fearful threats on him. The king also goes further to personalize his relationship with the ancestors by saying; “*My ancestors would have removed your lips for having the mouth to challenge his authority...*”

This statement by the king agrees with Kopytoff's position that traditional rulers assume for themselves the position of ancestors and act as-such. The king in this play assumes the position of both king and ancestor. Despite the fact that he is wrong in the matter, he ignores every plea and rather threatens Kaka with death. Without any rational thought, he proceeds to hold Tola (Kaka's betrothed) in custody for his son as a wife. The king's son is scheduled to return from America after completion of his studies and the only gift his father (the king) demands is a wife. But instead of him getting any beautiful woman in the community or at least allowing his son to make his choice, he decides against all odds to take another person's (Kaka's) bride to be the wife of his son.

Kaka's resistance to the king's irrational orders makes him a scapegoat that the king decides to use to set an example to anyone who challenges or disobeys him. In a radical decision, the king orders;

**KING:** make the brute a slave on my farm

**TOLA:** No, Kabiyesi! No!

**KING:** And make sure he doesn't escape. (Ogunyemi' 1985, p.13)

This shows the highest level of autocracy emanating from a leader of the people. The scenario also indicates the nature and politics of traditional rulers. It also reveals the type of capitalist system run by them. It again explains the Kings superior class position and his exploitative economic and social relations with his subjects. Any member of the community especially those within the lower class group who despises the king's orders runs the risk of facing severe punishment or worst still they may face death. Without any respite, the king does not only take away Kaka's bride but also instructs that he should be "[made] a brute to work on the farm." Tola, the betrothed bride of Kaka who is captured by the king pleads and shed tears for her release. She pleads thus:

**TOLA:** Can't you understand my feelings, Olori? I want to be free like my mother and not tired down to the palace to observe all its taboos. I am nothing Olori, but an ordinary girl who will be happy only with an ordinary man. I respect you; I respect His Highness and admire his son. But I have my man already. If you do me this favour and advise His highness to leave a poor girl alone, the Almighty will reward you in return (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.14-15).

From the expression of Tola above, it can be deduced that she has accepted her position and status as a commoner and is not equal by any standard to be a wife to the king's son. This also evidences the conflict of people from different classes.

The king uses the fiction of ancestral authority to enslave the would be bride of Kaka. Despite Tola's plea to be allowed to marry the man of his choice, the king remains adamant.

It is interesting to note that, despite the wrong and irrational decision imposed by the king against the decision of the elders and councillors, the ancestors or gods do not show or send any message of warning to the king. However, the same ancestors in the remaining parts of the play send a cautionary message regarding the son of the king. Muludun, the Ifa Priest, arrives at the palace and advises the king thus;

**MULUDUN:** I spread the oracle widely. I studied it closely, kabiyesi, and twice the same thing appeared on my divination sand.

**KING:** Is it anything bad, wise father?

**MULUDUN:** A wish, like inspiration, is an elusive thing you can do little about, even if everything is at your disposal. Tonight's affair was a grand one and there will be many more as long as the royal pool is not muddied by your son's imperial horse?

**KING:** what exactly is the matter? Is he postponing his arrival?

**MULUDUN:** He will arrive in a fortnight, but there will be a recurring crisis. (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.15).

The crisis referred to by the Ifa priest hinges on the fact that the son of the king will come back to act against him. The Ifa priest proceeds to say that everything will be fine if "the royal pool is not muddied by your son's imperial horse." By imperial horse, the Ifa priest foresees the son bringing into the community a foreigner who will distort the age-old practice of their tradition. As the play progresses, the Prince returns and brings with him a white woman who he claims is his wife. This singular act creates a lot of conflict between him and his father who, as we know, has already arranged a wife for him in the name of tradition. Adubi the prince is greatly opposed to such a decision, which he challenges as old fashioned and unreasonable in every sense. According to Adubi, the choice of a wife is supposed to be entirely his choice and not the choice of anybody else. His father the king however insists that his act is based on what tradition demands and there is nothing he can do about it. In an earlier pronouncement, the king had promised, "my 'yes' shall be 'yes' and my 'No' a rigid 'No'. *The day I go back on my word let me die an instant death*" (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.5), it means therefore that nothing will make him change from whatever decision he has taken. This attitude rules out the role and position of advisers or even elders who are part of the council.

When the prince (Adubi) prefers to die rather than abandon the white woman (Joy) who he had married during his stay in America, his father the king is adamant in reverting to his words. In fact, the king sends the white woman away and compels his son to take over his duty as a husband to the woman he has chosen for him to marry. He also threatens that if Adubi does not obey his orders he will disown him as his son. The threats however do not move Adubi and despite the advice of the elders for the king to reverse his decision, the king prefers to remain faithful to his words. He goes to his shrine and reminds the oracle of his promise not to go against his words. He then takes poison and kills himself rather than seeing his son disobey him and tradition.

The suicide of the king in Ogunyemi's *The Vow* is driven by certain factors that are both intrinsic to himself as a person and based on the position he occupies as King. The elements of pride, authority and power establish for him the meaning of the position he occupies. As already noted, he captures some of his people and keeps them as slaves to work on his farms. He assumes a lot of power that makes everyone fear him. He therefore finds it very insulting for a man of his position and for the respect he has garnered from his community men and women to be disrespected by his own son. In addition, the fact that he represents tradition, the disobedience of his son to him and to tradition is unpardonable. He prefers to die rather than watch himself lose his respect and honour before his people. To him if he goes back on his words, it means the people will not take him seriously. He therefore chooses to earn for himself respect by showing that a man is not supposed to go against his words no matter what the situation may be. The reception of this suicide in traditional Yoruba culture is not necessarily a cultural practice demanded of the king; it is the creation and decision of the king. However, he is not condemned for taking his life but his suicide represents both a tragedy and a show of manliness.

## **Conclusion**

The question of suicide and its representation in traditional African societies, especially of the Yoruba society is hinged on several factors. And apart from representing a dominant image created by members of the elite to objectify their motivation, it also serves as a potential tool to escape from ignominy and to derive for themselves of the honour. By utilizing their role as socio-political figures, they personalize most cultural embodiments like ancestors, and even gods in order to dominate the peasantry.

The potential contribution of this study therefore lies in its dedicated focus on suicide in Yoruba culture as represented in *The Vow*. This should add to a growing corpus of critical reflection on suicide, and elaborate an epistemological base for understanding Yoruba belief systems and values.

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