

Text to Context: Re-interpreting Suicide in Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*

by

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Abstract

This study positions itself towards a critical re-interpretation of suicide in Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and the reception of it in traditional Yoruba culture of south west Nigeria, and thus, shows that social structure determines the motivations for the acts of suicide in traditional African society, and Yoruba society in particular. Second, this study uses the textual analysis as its methodology. The approach is descriptive as it illuminates the circumstances that surround the suicide of Kurunmi in Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*. Next, the study discovers that the suicide in Rotimi's play is not mainly an escape from shame but a necessary and practical step to attain honour. And last, the study ascertains that the failure of traditional elites in an attempt to manipulate culture and tradition for their political interests leads them to frustration, and subsequently suicide.

Prelude 1: Richard Cory

Whenever Richard Cory went down town
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim

And he was quietly arrayed,
And he was always human
When he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses, when he said,
"Good-morning" and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich-yes, richer than a king-
And admirably schooled in every race:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish we were in his place

So, on we worked, and waited for the light
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head
(Robinson, 1953)

Prelude 2: Personal Observations

The year 1999 was my first encounter with Edwin Arlington's poem; *Richard Cory*. As a high school student, I read the first lines of the poem with admiration and felt a momentary feeling of literary envy for the great man that *Richard Cory* was. I almost felt being like him especially with the pulse and impulse that accompanied his description. But as the lines of the poem flipped out of my 'recite-ment' and made an imagined way to my memory, I was confronted with the terrible ending; "[he]...went home and put a bullet through his head." Within a moment, I had to pause to come to terms with the fact that a man like that could actually kill himself – the envy of all. Because I could not place exactly from the poem what had ignited Cory's suicide, I decided alongside my mates to ask our teacher; why did *Richard Cory* kill himself? Our teacher wobbled with the reasons especially as it was not stated in the poem nor could the reason be traced. That was my first encounter with the act of suicide (self -termination of life) in literature.

In 2003, four years after I left high school and became a university undergraduate at Benue State University in north central Nigeria and a fresh drama student, I was exposed as is the normal routine to the basics of the drama discipline. Though I was not quite interested as a student in the art of dramatic performances, I was caught up in a careful study of some of the plays that were recommended for reading and practical presentation. My interest I think was because literature was my best subject in high school where I read novels, plays and recited a number of poems. I read in my first year a number of plays some of which I was also opportune to play a role. The first play I read was *A Restless run of locust* (1975) written by one of Nigeria's famous playwrights; Femi Osofisan.

In the play, two conflicting characters were engaged in a serious political battle. As opponents, they employed all the tricks, treachery and machinations in order to ensure victory. It was a battle between the young and the old. The old thought they have the wisdom to lead, the young considered their strength. However, at the end of the play, the young politician won the election. The old man to avoid shame from the defeat and considering how much money he had spent, went inside and committed *suicide*.

In 2010 at the University of Ibadan during the course of my postgraduate programme for my Master's degree, I once again came across and read a number of plays; *The Gods are not to blame* (1968) by Ola Rotimi (Ojuala a female character committed suicide), *A song of a Goat* (1964) by J.P Clark (Tonye a male character committed suicide), *Kurunmi* (1971) by Ola Rotimi (Kurunmi committed suicide). The several suicide acts in these plays raised concerns for me to investigate the phenomenon of suicide. In July of 2010, I wrote and presented a research paper for the 7th International conference on sustainable development held at the University of Calabar, Nigeria titled; "Between interest culture and Murder culture: Reflections in Nigerian dramatic literature." In the paper, I tried to examine the predominant culture of murder in some literary texts that I had read. I also examined the culture of death and suicide which seemed to occur in some of the literary text I was examining. Many questions emerged after I had presented the paper in relation to suicide. The most controversial question that emerged from the participants demanding a hydra-headed answer was; why *suicide*?

Introduction

This study is on suicide and how it is represented in the fictional text of Ola Rotimi. I demonstrate this by engaging in an in-depth textual analysis and re-interpretation of the suicide act in Rotimi's play. I focus my analysis on Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* (1971). The textual analysis is drawn with a specific focus on the theme of suicide. The act of Kurunmi's suicide is studied as well as the textual representation of it in tandem with its reception and understanding in socio-cultural context amongst the traditional Yoruba culture of south west Nigeria. I begin this study by first illuminating the suicide phenomenon and providing substantial clarifications that distinguishes the phenomenon as a product of culture, and a common property of art.

Suicide, a term generally referred to as the intentional termination of one's own life has been an object of fundamental concern of people of all cultural backgrounds. The disposition of people to suicide itself, as well as the degree of concern surrounding it has varied greatly from one culture to another. Throughout history, suicide has evoked an astonishingly wide range of reactions, bafflement, dismissal, heroic glorification, sympathy, anger, moral or religious condemnation, but it is never uncontroversial. Suicide has therefore become an object of multidisciplinary scientific study, with sociology, anthropology, psychology, and psychiatry each providing insights into the phenomenon (Gvion and Apter 2012, Jamison 2011, Joiner 2010).

In sociology, the sociological theory of Emile Durkheim identifies three types of suicide, namely, the egoistic, altruistic and the anomic through which he tries to show that the incidence of suicide depends on the degree to which a person feels connected to, or integrated within society. Suicide was therefore more likely where an individual lacked close relationship or social bonds (Durkheim, 2013).

This theory however is of little help in explicating some aspects of suicide such as political suicides in traditional Yoruba culture where an ambivalent situation arose when leaders killed themselves due to political defeat, and at the same time sought to preserve their personal and family honor in the face of impending alienation and public shame. Durkheim's position of the altruistic explanation will not function properly in traditional Yoruba culture which of course obscures the social tensions surrounding suicide (Adebayo, 2010).

The study of suicide however ranged to other perspectives and took a significant change since Durkheim. Lester (2013) sees suicide as the response of people to certain problems which may include social issues, economic stress, mental illness, health problems etc. The responses can also be reflective of the typologies of suicide that are specifically identified as escapist, aggressive, oblativ and ludic (Van, Witte, Cukrowicz, Braithwaite, Selby, & Joiner, 2010). The oblativ suicide appears to have some semblance to political suicides; its sacrificial ethos evokes a sense of passivity and resignation that are unrepresentative in a Yoruba context.

Many psychologists take Sigmund Freud as their point of departure due to his introspective approach to the study of suicide. Karl Menninger's theory identifies three distinct psychic elements in suicide: the wish to kill, the wish to be killed and the wish to die (Menninger, 1938). These elements resonate with Freud's analysis of the death impulse and his emphasis on the sadistic and masochistic tendencies of suicide (Chamberlain, 2011). Edwin Shneidman's 'mentalist' view of suicide also emphasizes unbearable psychological pain as being at the root of most suicides (Shneidman, 2001). Though such cases may seem to reflect on most suicides, the psychopathological frameworks will however be difficult to apply to cases of culturally-sanctioned suicides. It therefore appears that the value of these theories of (Durkheim, 1897, Lester, 2013, Menninger, 1938, Chamberlain, 2011, and Shneidman, 2001) classifications to the study of suicide in Africa and traditional Yoruba culture in particular is not so much in their direct applicability to particular cases, but in the general idea that studies of suicide should take note not only of the individual psyche, but also of the social institutions and environment within which such suicides would have taken place (Olaniyan, 2010).

This varying perception and reception of suicide around disciplines explores the multi-dimensional nature of it. This has tended to produce in itself different schools of thoughts in trying to look at the best approach towards the study of suicide (Whitt, 2010). These approaches have become popular within the sociological and psychological debates. Ajdacic-Gross, Bopp, Ring, Gutzwiller, & Rossler, (2010) in their essay titled; "Seasonality in suicide—A review and search of new concepts for explaining the heterogeneous phenomena" argue and advocate on the first hand the adoption of what it calls 'psychological autopsies' while the others insists on purely sociological methods.

As much as these arguments favor some aspects in the study of suicide, the problem with the theories is that while some of them have been tested with success in some western societies, they only have limited applicability to other parts of the world, especially in the context of Africa.

It is in regard that these arguments, theories and approaches to the phenomenon of suicide that this paper will provide to understand the full significance of Kurunmi's suicide. Moreover, this study owes a factual and interpretative depth to Balogun (2014), Arata (2006), Adeboye (2006), Simon (2003), Obadiogwu (2003), Crow (2000) and Olufunke (1996) who have studied suicide in other African and Nigerian plays as a tragic act. Therefore, a conceptual background and synopsis of the play (Kurunmi) can be outlined.

From History to “a Play”: Exploring the His-[Story] of Rotimi's *Kurunmi*

Rotimi's play, *Kurunmi* (1971) is built on the history of the Ibadan-Ijaye war which took place as a result of the contention of the different successor powers of the Old Oyo Empire, an empire which was attempting to fill the power vacuum shaped by the breakdown of the empire due to its sacking by the Fulani army in the year 1831. However, before the sacking of the Old Oyo or Katunga as it was then called, the empire had become a representative of the most significant influence with its territory spreading from south west Nigeria to Dahomey. After its downfall, Atiba relocated with some of the refugees to found a new Oyo and by the middle of the 19th century, Oyo has rebounded back as a key political force as it was now secure from the threat of the Fulani (Ajayi, 2010).

Atiba prospered in building a new capital, however for military strength, he relied on two major warrior towns; Ibadan and Ijaye. He cleverly offered titles to the leaders of these towns – the leader of Ibadan, a fierce warrior; Ibikunle was given the title of Balogun or War general, while the leader of Ijaye, Kurunmi, was pronounced with the title of Are-Ona-Kankanfo or Generalissimo. Of these two towns, Ibadan and Ijaye, Smith and Ajayi said this about Ibadan:

...though Ibadan continued to recognise the suzerainty of the Alaafin, it was largely an autonomous republic ruled by a military oligarchy. The class of chiefs trained their young men in war and set their slaves and prisoners of war to cultivate their farms. Agriculture was a lowly and war a noble profession. (Smith and Ajayi, 2012, p.69)

On Ijaye Smith and Ajayi again commented:

At Ijaye, Kurunmi, the greatest Yoruba general established a personal ascendancy. He was king, judge, general, entertainer, sometimes also executioner. All refugees in the town had to submit to his will or quit. (Smith and Ajayi, 2012, p.70)

There arose an obvious rivalry between the towns of Ibadan and Ijaye. Therefore, when Atiba recognized that he was soon to die as a result of the intense discontent, he summoned his principal chiefs, notably amongst them, Kurunmi and Ibikunle and informed them to accept the crowned Prince Adelu (his son), as his successor. This decision was seen as contrary to the constitution of Oyo, which stipulates that at the death of an Alaafin, his eldest son, the crowned Prince has to die with him. Ibadan however accepted Atiba's plea but Ijaye, under the command of Kurunmi, refuted and rejected Atiba's decision as a violation of tradition. The outcome of their respective stance is the source of drama for Rotimi. (Obafemi and Yerima, 2004).

The Play, *Kurunmi* represents the depth of Rotimi's exploration of historical materials by drawing his tragic protagonist from the compelling personage of Are Kurunmi, and historically, the Oyo Empire was one of the four most prominent coastal empires of West Africa, rising to their apogee in the eighteenth century and began to disintegrate early in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Hence, the Oyo nation was in outright rebellion against the authority of Alaafin Atiba, and needed political stability which he believed he could attain by establishing continuity of his lineage by contravening traditional and customary practice of naming his son, Adelu king after him, rather than letting him die with the king as custom demands. Kurunmi the Generalissimo of the empire would not allow such a flagrant slap on the face of tradition. The plot of the play is therefore woven around this conflict and the fate of Kurunmi, commander of the empire and the Lord of Ijaye, in his rebellion against the monarch and Alaafinate at Oyo. In the end, a combined force of Oyo under the captains of Ibadan, Ogunmola and Ibikunle, subdued Kurunmi in battle. On this physical defeat and humiliation of his desertion by the spiritual forces of the Yoruba pantheons, Kurunmi faced up to the quietude of his own fate and committed suicide after due catharsis.

As a play that is steeped with a conflict on tradition emanating from Kurunmi's ideological stance, there is need to understand the concept of tradition, especially as it plays in traditional Yoruba society. This will provide an understanding of tradition and how it reflects in Rotimi's play.

Tradition and Suicide in Yoruba Culture: South West Nigeria

Tradition has and will continue to remain a closely knit practice that defines and identifies a particular group of people. Societies all over the world have certain practices that are associated with them. In modern practice, tradition can be invented to reflect the historical past of the people. Hobsbawm (1983) sees invented tradition to mean "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historical past (p.1)." Hobsbawm's reflection of an invented tradition is quite illuminating as it adopts both the ritualistic nature of tradition and the symbolic interpretation of it.

This is because not all traditions must accompany with them any form of ritual practice, but the overtly symbolic nature that a particular form of practice through constant repetition derives meaning from those who practice it. To appropriate this conception is to say that, the act of suicide in traditional African society but the Yoruba society to be particular absorbs an internal meaning and reception from members of the community. The act of suicide in Yoruba culture therefore detaches itself from the inhuman, illegal and violation of human life as perceived in Western and contemporary thought.

As a global phenomenon, suicide has different interpretations and reception among societies. In Nigeria, with nearly over four hundred and fifty (450) ethnicities is replete with multicultural groups. To focus and relate the reception of suicide in Nigeria to be the same among the cultures will generate intellectual debate and academic controversy. It is understandable that suicide has been reflected in some Nigerian plays and novels; they differ from one culture to the other. The concern of this paper is to look at the Yoruba view of suicide and how it is represented in the play of Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* (1971). It is however important to understand how suicide is received among traditional Yoruba culture of south west Nigeria.

Iliffe (2005) expresses the art and act of suicide in traditional Yoruba culture, as one of the expressions of protest and resistance, which is not particular to 'super-individuals'; rather, it is a way to discredit one's oppressor, and liberate oneself from torture. This philosophy is not strange to the moral ideology of the African. On the one hand, suicide can be a measure used by people as an escape from shame and a protection of honour; and by far the most significant observation, suicide is therefore a therapeutic, meditated action in which the subject is in full control as the producer.

A point that may incidentally throw light on this hypothesis of Iliffe is the understanding of forms and functions of suicide in the African worldview. Iliffe's supposition, which I would like to quote extensively, is valid enough on this point:

Suicide was a common response to enslavement, cruelty, and offended honour. In the Atlantic trade, many slaves killed themselves before embarkation, drowned themselves by jumping overboard, refused food and starved to death... The cape colony averaged between fifteen and twenty reported slave suicides a year during the eighteenth century, overwhelmingly by foreign-born males who hanged themselves. Some were escaping cruel punishments for crimes or desertion... Fear of being sold to brutal masters was another motive... some were moved by humiliation and loss of liberty (Iliffe, 2005, p.131).

In considering this phenomenon with some significant account, W.S. Allen's report of 7 February 1883 on how one of the Are's slaves stabbed himself with a knife in his belly and the bowels came out, intending to kill himself, rather than being kept in shackles. Within varying degrees of illustrative works we have had the chance to study the striking similarities in cultural ideology and religious belief as the guiding principles in the complex themes of suicide. A continuous opposition is not only desirable but essential for a fuller understanding that the will to die or commit suicide is not as a consequence of external shattering experience, but is rather entrenched in the collective ideology represented by what Abati would refer to as a people's philosophical penchants' and 'a replication of cultural reality'. According to Abati, "Death and indeed suicide has more than one meaning, context is important" (Abati, 1990, p.17). I agree with Abati's assertion in his submission. This has to do with the fact that most of the opinions on the phenomenon, especially from the stand-point of different religious doctrines and racial backgrounds, are diverse. Many of the writers who have tried to explain the concept of death through suicide only raise concerns about its purpose. Thus, the varied opinions on suicide, according to Clarke and Lester's (2013) observation fall into two distinct categories – the One-way or Uni-linear perspective and the Cyclic view. To those who hold the Uni-linear Perspective, suicide leads to the eventual end to human life on earth. It is considered to be a complete extermination. This view is prevalent in Islamic thought, Christianity and Judaism. The Cyclic view, on the other hand, holds that life is repetitive. To them, the result of suicide is 'a momentary disappearance which is revived again in another form'. Swami Rama of the Himalaya stated in his Introduction to M.V. Kamath's *Philosophy of Life and Death* that;

(Birth) is but one bend of the eternal stream of life. In its continuity the stream of life rushes through many avenues and finally meets the ocean. Coming out of one avenue is called death and going through another avenue is called birth. So is the case of human life... (Death) is merely a game of hide and seeks which can never mystify the wise one who knows how to look to himself and beyond (Kamath, 2006. p.xi).

It will be deduced from Swami's assertion that the act of suicide is received without a second thought especially when one believes that his/her death is only a continuation of his existence in a better realm. Swami further expresses the perspective of those who hold the cyclic view of human existence such as the Buddhists, the Greeks, the Yoruba, the Hindus and the Chinese that "Birth and death are like two commas in the sentence of life. The sentence of life begins from eternity and is everlasting and never ending, "As one changes one's pillow cover or book cover, so one casts off one's body" (Kamarth, 2006, pp.xii-xiii). Casting off the body is called death and assuming a new garment is called birth.

All the views notwithstanding, mankind has never seen it as a familiar aspect of nature that needs to be taken for granted. He/she could not entirely underestimate the power of death and its reality in everyday life. Thus, sorrow is exhibited as the dominant attitude to the manifestation of death and the moment of dying.

There is bound to be a feeling of loss and grief at the passing away of a loved one and even as one thinks of committing suicide, there is an extreme moment of psychological and emotional pain before the act is finally done. As a result of the existing agonizing fear and anxiety that the body would become lifeless, deteriorate and decay, death is strongly and often portrayed as a tragedy. This point does not erase the fact that one's death by any means will not constitute a tragic moment for those still living, especially close friends and relatives. The depiction of the moments of sorrow and its psychological effects which is the subject of thanatology, the study of death is found in the collection of passages, phrases and proverbs of both ancient and modern literature. For example, in the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* (c. 3500 BC), according to Guo, Liu, Bartlett, Tang, and Lotze (2013, p.126); death is depicted as a moment of captivity: "Death is before me today as a man longs to see his house when (I would be) in captivity". The feeling of exasperation and dejection at the thought of suicide is accurately depicted in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In the play, the eponymous hero Hamlet, in his wish to eliminate his grief at the cost of his life, reflects on the after-effects of death:

To be, or not to be: that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them? To die: to sleep; No more; and, by a sleep to say we end the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummation devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep; to sleep: perchance to dream: ay there's the rub for in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause (Act 3, Scene I).

The moment of tragedy is also creatively affirmed in African and Oriental literary traditions. Wole Soyinka (1988) in response to Biodun Jeyifo's question on his opposing antinomies and 'a deeply and profound tragic and pessimistic outlook, remarks that tragedy is a reflection of the human condition which the human spirit must overcome and enrich himself through the example of 'those who succeed in overcoming the moment of despair, those who arise from the total fragmentation of the psyche, the annihilation of even their ego, and yet succeed in piercing them together, piece the rubble together to emerge and enrich us by that example' (Soyinka, 1988, pp. xvii-xviii). As further put by Soyinka, the role of the writer is not to 'ignore the tragic aspect of human experience, that tragic face of truth, that is part of the property of the experience, and that is part of the richness of art and literature.

Central to the act of suicide among the traditional Yoruba culture is the concept of honour. Honour is a concept that has to do with esteem, respectability and reputation. According to Peristiany & Pitt-Rivers;

Honour is the value of a person in his own eyes but also in the eyes of the society. It is his estimation of his own worth, his claim to pride, but it is also the acknowledgement of that claim, his excellence recognized by society, his right to pride. (Peristiany & Pitt-Rivers, 2005, p.21)

This means that a personal appraisal of oneself is not sufficient to confer honour, the society must 'recognize that claim' which is characteristically displayed through a person's reputation. The role of society as judge is thus very substantial in the realisation of honour by its members. These two proportions of honour: the personal and the social are thus closely related. Suicide among the traditional Yoruba people was made manifest because of the fear of public ridicule also called "ignominy" that partially drove them to kill themselves. Another reason for the act of suicide was the 'collectivity of honour'. Collectivity of honour is associated with societal groups such as families, ancestries and kin groups. Amongst such groups, an act of dishonour by a single member will affect all others just as a single member would bask in the honour of the group. Therefore where status is acknowledged by birth, 'honour develops not only from individual status but from antecedence' (Adeboye, 2006).

Exploring Kurunmi's Suicide at a Glance

The suicide of Kurunmi in Rotimi's *Kurunmi* is one that engages a complicated complex of social, political and cultural issues. The reality of the suicide is far from resolving the personal defeat of Kurunmi but one that creates a political formation and reflects in terms of the social and cultural attitude of the society. At the extended moment, when Kurunmi takes poison to terminate his life, he drags into the play a memory buried in his firm believe that tradition is an important part of a people, even in the midst of 'civilization.' Kurunmi also buries with him, the memory of those who sacrificed their lives and are consumed by the horrors of the war.

Kurunmi's suicide records an intense drama of hatred, rejection and non-compromise of a section of the community that is bent at obstructing the continuity of an inherited tradition. In trying to retain and sustain a cherished tradition, Kurunmi's suicide therefore amounts to the culmination of defeat by the contending forces of Ibadan. His suicide does not only represent defeat but also represents a complete triumph of a readiness and willingness to die for his beliefs. Right from the beginning of the play, Kurunmi is loved, respected and feared for his warrior-ship but in the extended incidents of the play, he is hated for his defiance of change. In a deeper sense, the change infused in the play by Rotimi is significant of a suggested black-and-white image. Kurunmi effectively reflects the communal essence of black tradition and is unwilling to be compromised. However, the late Atiba represents the white individualistic mode of living and proceeds to independently take a decision that is contrary to the dictates of his culture. But due to his influence and political machination, he is able to buy the conscience of the elders of Ibadan who attune to his decision without question. Though Rotimi uses the black character (Atiba) to demonstrate the change, the intention is to emphasise these worlds especially with the camouflage of the white priest Rev. Mann.

The dichotomies suggested in Rotimi's *Kurunmi* by the 'black-and-white' facts and images establish a dramatic world and political structure whose vocabulary, poetry and proverbs sustain the literality and monologic interpretation of the play. Why Atiba's enthronement of his son Adelu as the King after his death is suggestive of political dominance and sustained influence of a family lineage, Kurunmi also represents a member of the elite class with political influence and dynasty to demonstrate his authority. However, Kurunmi is presented as a die-hard critic of white civilization and is completely opposed to subscribing to it. In response to this, Kurunmi confronts the white priest Rev. Mann when he paid him a visit thus;

Kurunmi: ...Imagine me for a moment. I go to your country, and tell your father: 'Mr. So-and-So, from this day on, I want you to give up the ways of your fathers; cast away your manner of worship; neglect your rituals; Mr. So-and-So, snub the shrines of your fathers; betray your gods.' Now Reverend Mann, how do you think your father would feel?

Rev. Mann: The people of Oyo have accepted the Faith, and Ibadan, the Reverend Hinderer is doing very well, not to mention the Reverend Townsend in Abeokuta, and other-

Kurunmi: My friend, you do not answer my question. Instead, you talk of Ibadan and Oyo and – the people of Ibadan are not people. They are horses full of muscles, small in sense... (Rotimi, 1971, p.35).

This position clearly reveals that the action of the late king Atiba in enthroning his son against the customary laws of tradition was influenced by the persuasion of the whites who succeeded in capturing the people of Ibadan and aligning them to their own culture and civilization. As Rev. Mann said, "the people of Oyo have accepted the faith and Ibadan..." But Kurunmi is not deterred by this admonition and maintains his position. He questions the new religion of the colonialist which he thinks is intended to distract him.

Thus, the frenzy of Kurunmi's suicide becomes the world he has adopted just as he paradoxically proclaims his defeat of failing to uphold it despite his wishful thought and engagement in war. In the language of hatred which accompanies his suicide, he concentrates in a plethora of racially motivated slanders, including the stereotypes by which the black world is distinguished from the white. While the play itself has disturbed these images by its construction of a mysterious and complex black world, Kurunmi proceeds to reaffirm his disgust to the people of Ibadan who have allowed the influence of the white to prevail. He expresses his anger thus:

Kurunmi:...when a leader of men has led his people to disaster, and what remains of his present life is but a shadow of his proud past, then it is time to be leader no more. My curse upon you both, if my body stays here for the vultures of Ibadan to peck at. My curse upon you and upon your seeds forever, if my skull serves as drinking-cup for Adelu. (Rotimi, 1971, p.93).

His last speech therefore reasserts characteristically the reductive form that tends to dispel the mystery and the difficulty. Killing himself as he challenges the interception to tradition represents in Kurunmi's mind the loathsome black man in white mythology.

The Cultural Politics of Kurunmi's Suicide

Rotimi's *Kurunmi* represents what formalist critics have tended to reduce to the stereotype of a cultural play steeped in the cultural nationalism of the late fifties and the periods immediately after political independence in Nigeria. The play is also often vulgarized in terms of the 'clash of cultures'. This reductionist tendency is what Soyinka foresaw in the temptation of critics to interpret his play; *Death and the king's horseman* (1975) as merely a clash of cultures and warns in his introduction of the play against such interpretations. It is in the same vain that Rotimi appears to be against this reductionist tendency of his play, *Kurunmi* (1971). An in-depth study of Kurunmi in relation to the cultural formation goes beyond the normalization of just a clash of cultures but engages into discovering the cultural politics as well as the representation of suicide that informs the play. It also suffices to recognise that the play continues in the tradition of cultural nationalism, which recognized that cultural liberation is an essential condition for political liberation. (Ngugi, 1972) It is this condition that informed francophone Africa towards the tendency of the literary formation known as Négritude, in the manner in which it was immediately attendant upon nationalist struggles for independence. This attitude glorified the African past in a situation in which colonial ideology had sought to inferiorize it.

Rotimi's *Kurunmi* as well as Kurunmi's suicide reflects the cultural politics informed by the stylization of historical material or historical reconstruction of Négritude. This reconstruction emanates as a result of the reaction by the literary elite against the hegemony of colonial ideology and individual will. It also illustrates a measure of psychological trauma which the elite produced through the bowels of colonial attachments. Kurunmi's suicide represents in this sense an aberration from colonial ideology and an avoidance of a futuristic psychological trauma at the instance of a re-collective memory of the war and his defeat. Moreover, the African past has been sharpened by class antagonism especially after independence and this representation manifest in clear evidence in the contraption of structural hegemonic platforms of the ruling class in Rotimi's *Kurunmi*. The cultural politics in *Kurunmi* does not only provide a platform of a showcase of the elitist influence but a gradual removal of the peasantry class in the social as well as economic system. This aligns to the ideas of Marxist literary theorists who envision such literary reflection of members of the literati who dominate the superstructure and aim at legitimizing power by having total control of the base.

On the other hand, the play is informed of the so-called "clash of cultures". However, it also imbues a sense of nostalgia which Soyinka (1975) calls a "threnodic essence", a lamentational quality about the destruction of a peoples cultural heritage. In the stylization of Kurunmi as a character there is transportation into a structure of feelings that aligns us with what, in appearance, is immanently African.

However, this sort of Africanized process is oblivious of the class antagonisms that inform the feudal relationship in Kurunmi. What seems to be misconstrued as ‘Our’ culture is ‘Our’ culture reified through the agency of the aristocracy. Crow, (1983) makes a significant comment about Kurunmi when he says;

...Kurunmi is both the advocate and the embodiment of “tradition”. The “richness” of the Oba’s character, like that of the Yoruba General’s, cannot be separated from the “richness” of the tradition of which he is the bearer. In the process of empathizing with both characters, the audience identified emotionally with “tradition”, and its vague but compelling values. (Crow, 1983, p.29)

The culture that is often emphasized as “Ours” as constantly re-echoed by Kurunmi is only a manipulated one designed by the aristocracy. This signifies the evidence of suicide by the kings, elders or kinsman in some Nigerian plays to revolve around the rhetoric of cultural protection. The political and ideological intention is directed ultimately to the consolidation of power of the chiefs, the kings and the elites. Kurunmi’s suicide is therefore generated as a result of his failure to maintain his status quo. If he supports a change in tradition, it means that he will be a subject, but if he maintains his stand as a man of tradition, he will be able to have his own followers and emerge at establishing his own dynasty where he will rule. This is a political move that is unique compared to today’s politics, the only difference been that current leaders cannot fall by the sword. The politicians of today will rather do whatever they can to hold on to their interest. They do this by engaging in various forms of bribery, corruption and even murder. This is why the play Kurunmi and the suicide of Kurunmi is representative of ‘a drama of the ruling class’. By therefore appropriating the residual peasant based cultural forms, it seems that we are again dragged by the cultural ideologues into lamenting the passing away of tradition, and by so doing, reinforce the contemporary generation of the likes of Kurunmi in Nigerian society.

The political ideology of Kurunmi represents what the cultural policy has attempted to do in Nigeria since the independence era. Other cultural forms like dance, festivals, proverbs etc only combine at a political level to give a supposed appearance of harmony in the relationship between the rulers and the ruled. Ideologically, the false participation in people’s culture further tends to alienate and also integrate the people into the dominant scheme of things. As a matter of historical reflection, Kurunmi was written during the Nigerian Civil war, which was described by Rotimi in an interview; *Dem say: Interview with eight Nigerian writers* (1974, p.64) as being “at its bloodiest peak at a time of my writing the play.” It was therefore written at a time when the ideals of “national independence had been shattered by petty squabbles within the Nigerian ruling elite. The war did not only foster political cohesiveness, but also attempted to build a national culture that people from all nationality groups can identify with. The war also reinforced Nigeria’s integration into the world capitalist system, and its attempt to neutralize the counter-hegemonic potential of Third World peoples.

The significance of Kurunmi's suicide therefore, is not only limited to the self-termination of life but one that provides a way for the eventual establishment of the capitalist system which is in fact part of the change that the late king Atiba was determined to foreground. On this basis therefore, formalist critics of Kurunmi consider the battle and conflict between the two world, that of Atiba and Kurunmi to be a conflict between tradition and change. The superficial level of the stylization of the conflict indicates a metaphor used to suggest the inevitability of change, that if you refuse change, change will break you. The refusal of Kurunmi to the change that was coming led him to the level of a self-termination of life. The scenario that reflects this begins in the play with Oba Atiba who at the cross road of death holds a conference of the Alaafinate to discuss dynastic succession. He suggests in the conference that, Adelu (Crown Prince) should succeed him when he dies. All the important chiefs and warlords-Oni Ife, Timi Ede, Ogunmola, Ibikunle etc. give their consent, except Kurunmi who stormed out of the conference because it is contrary to tradition. He substantiates this in his speech when he says:

The pride of man, my people, is in his tradition, something to learn from for the peace of his present, something to learn from for the peace of his tomorrow. The day the tall Iroko loses its roots is the day the baby ant shits on its head. The day a people lose their tradition is the day their death begins-weeds they become, climbers, seaweed, floating, they know not where to. Doomed (Rotimi, 1971, pp. 15-16)

Kurunmi is therefore depicted to represent the image of a traditionalist, or an arch defender of tradition. His defence of the so called tradition is not without its benefits. As the Are-ona Kakanfo in charge of the Ijaiye Kurunmi, thus, he as at his disposal the ultimate control of the resources of the land. He acquires hectares of illegal lands, collected the community's properties like goats, farms and takes ownership of the market where all revenue are accounted to him. He becomes so powerful that anything to threaten the position he occupies means life or death. He only defends the capitalist system which he represents and benefits from. His suicide therefore exceeds the boundaries of cultural preservation but represents the politics of cultural manipulation by the so called elders and rulers in traditional societies, especially Yoruba society.

In affirming his desperation and resistance to the decision of Atiba, Kurunmi draws from the corpus of proverbial imagery as against the "verbosity" of Timi Ede and Bashorun Oluyole who speak plain prose. For example, Kurunmi says:

Go! Tell the world, Kurunmi will never prostrate himself to shoot a deer with the father one morning, and then squat with the son in the evening to shoot a goose (Rotimi, 1971, p.21).

Culturally, to prostrate is a dignified portrayal of respect as against squatting which is less edifying. However, the significance of the goose is set against the majesty of the deer. Kurunmi also manages to cut a paternalistic figure in this scene, and end up protecting all his citizens, slaves and all:

I will have no one call my slaves, slaves. There are no slaves in Ijaiye. Every woman, every child in Ijaiye is Kurunmi's child (Rotimi, 1971, p.18).

The statement of Kurunmi therefore reveals and emphasizes the fact that he is in control of the people and has some as slaves. His denial that they should not be recognized as slaves but as his children is only a political statement designed to perpetuate his domination. This foregrounds the fact that, Kurunmi is not a defender of tradition in any significant cultural sense of the word. What he stands to uphold is a dynastic tradition which the other states in Alaafinate consider obsolete. In the real sense of the word, he uses the ideology of tradition to mobilize his people for his own interests. What Kurunmi is interested in are land, port and the control of trade routes to the Atlantic Ocean. The Alaafinate existed in a political situation in which the centre (Oyo) was ineffectual and merely a spiritual centre. Power was therefore shared between Ijaye and Ibadan. Kurunmi stands to gain by maintaining the status quo. The Egba also decide to fight in support of Kurunmi's Ijaiye not because of tradition, but because with Ibadan defeated, they will recapture their kolanut farms.

However, it is significant to note that tradition propels war. Initially, the deployment of cultural elements favours Kurunmi, but later, they combine to constitute and ignite the hubristic factor in his character to the extent that the gods appear to desert him in the war and more in agreement with the prosecution of the war by the Ibadan. Kurunmi pleads with Ogun;

I want to move, Ogun I want to move. This will be my last chance. Let me move, I am not too old. Ogun, Sango, gods of our fathers. This is my last chance in this fight. (Rotimi 1971, p. 88-89)

With the Egba threatening him into crossing the River Ose, Kurunmi commits the most tactical blunder of the war. Thousands are killed, with River Ose turned into a river of blood. His five children are killed. With this, Kurunmi comes to recognize (what the Greeks call *Anagnorisis*) the futility of continuing the war. At this circumstance, he drinks poison and commits suicide.

The sympathy that is used in the play to empathize with the suicide of Kurunmi is only manipulated into sympathizing with Kurunmi's blunders and probably absolves him of his overzealousness. In the real sense of the word, what we witness is the fall of a great man who really does not deserve to be sympathized with as a result of his actions.

Rather we journal what he represents; the passing away of tradition. We are also nostalgically reintegrated into this 'traditional culture'. To further accentuate Kurunmi's suicide, Rotimi cleverly juxtaposes the supposedly quintessential African culture with the alien culture represented by Reverend Mann. Apart from using the Mann's as a structural device to keep a diary of the war, Rotimi introduces Reverend Mann to deepen Kurunmi's characterization. Rotimi introduces Reverend Mann and his Christian soldiers to also help sharpen the cultural antagonisms that inform the play. The stage direction in Act I, scene 2 of the play presents:

A band of Ijaiye Christian converts appears, led in a procession by the Rev and Mrs. Mann. Suddenly from a distance, the sound of Egungun drumming breaks forth and the converts begin to react uneasily: As the drumming and chanting come closer, members of the Christian group begin to run off one after the other. The mob converges on Rev. Mann, then move away, leaving him bleeding from a slash on his forehead.

Rotimi therefore, historically situates the role of Christianity in the process of colonial invasion. It is therefore important in Rotimi's cultural intention, for it to be seen to be defeated as represented in this scene. It is also manifested in the witty superiority of Kurunmi over Reverend Mann, who actually cuts a pathetic figure.

Far from the above, Kurunmi's suicide therefore deals with the cultural circumstance dominated by the warrior elite. There is what Robin (1978, p.40-50) in his essay; *The Marxist approach to historical explanation* depicts as "the dominance of militaristic values (glory, courage, etc.)... (which) is explained by the economic character of these societies." These values are not only meant to further entrench the warrior elite, but they are necessarily male values. What the warrior elite, as a dominant group, has done is to appropriate agency of male-hood to perpetuate itself. This also explains the marginal position of women in Rotimi's Kurunmi.

The cultural formation of Rotimi's *Kurunmi* does not only deploy the personal tragedy of Kurunmi but upholds the suicide of Kurunmi as a fundamental and functional act that attempts at resolving certain images. By loading the drama with a stock of residual motifs and rituals etc there is a transported empathy from the ruptured present – the Nigerian civil war into the past. By the suicide and eventual fall of Kurunmi there is a plausible elimination of danger in the present. (Crow, 2000)

Kurunmi's suicide is also enhanced to signal a rehabilitation of the tormented psyche that he would have suffered amidst all the traumas, challenges and shame. It goes further to imply that the subsequent act of Kurunmi's suicide represents an intentional departure from a potential psychological trauma that would have manifested in the absence of suicide. The cultural nature of the play does not intend to shake the foundations of the present, wracked as it is by civil war. What it anticipates is a return to normalcy with the end of the war in the play. Kurunmi's suicide therefore resolves the contending conflict and war that threatened the loss of more lives and properties.

The reception of such a suicide goes beyond the “tragic” end of Kurunmi but rather it presents to the people a feeling that he died for the sake of what he believes is tradition. Tradition being the core of what guides and unites the people, they glorify Kurunmi as a hero and a victor.

Conclusion

The question of suicide is one that enjoys a fascinating subject in many cultures around the world. Its complexity as well as variety is defined by a parallel reception of it as a tragic act and a cultural responsibility. Among the traditional Yoruba culture of south west Nigeria, accounts of suicide have seemingly gained association with members of the elite who use it as a political tool.

In Rotimi’s *Kurunmi*, we find that the concept of honour which his suicide is based is regrettably aristocratic, idealistic and consequently conservative. As a member of the ruling class, his suicide is received with honour by members of the community not minding what he led his people to. Kurunmi only resorted to suicide after failing to achieve his political move that was targeted at making him leader of the entire Oyo dynasty through corporation with his friend who would have become the Oba of Ibadan.

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