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Ritual form and mythologization of death in Wole Soyinka's 'Procession'

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Critics make a large claim that Wole Soyinka mythologizes death and deploys ritual form in his dramatic works but hardly account for the same in this light regarding his poetry, especially "Procession", a sequence which bears so many marks of this style. Critics of "Procession" discount a lot from its richness in mythological and ritual forms but focus more on its topical, social and political nature. The trend in the criticism of the sequence is obviously informed by the historical and political context of the sequence and its inclusion in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972), a collection on Soyinka's prison experience. This approach to "Procession" detracts from the art in the sequence, fails to appreciate fully the poetry's formal properties and so the poetry requires a close reading. Formalism is applied to study the poem and the study stresses the analysis of the work as a self-sufficient verbal entity, constituted by internal relations and independent of reference either to the state of mind of Soyinka or the actualities of the 'external' world. The approach highlights in a fresh manner the elements which the earlier criticism the poetry stresses to reveal Soyinka's mythologization of death and preoccupation with ritual forms in "Procession". The study reveals that Soyinka is not just preoccupied with political imprisonment and judicial death but mythologizes the experience and treats rites de passage. It shows further the breadth with which the poet accentuates the esoteric theme through his by deployment of devices such as symbols, the motifs of passage, biblical allusion, pathetic fallacy, pun, incantatory rhythm, paradox, irony and humour. **Keywords:** ritual, death, formalism, mythology, passage.

Introduction

Though made over three decades ago, the submission by Gibbs (14) on Wole Soyinka's works remains valid. The critic observes of the writer's works in the words following: "His writing is always worthwhile and sometimes masterly. Almost all of it bears frequent re-reading and yields new depths on each encounter. It will endure." "Procession" belongs to this category of Soyinka's writing but it is surprising however that over three decades after its publication its criticism has not yielded new depths and the sequence has continued to be read largely only in the light of politics, history and the poet's experience. "Procession" is a sequence under the subsection with the same title "Procession" in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* and comprises two poems for which Soyinka adopts the title of the subsection, titling them "Procession I" and "Procession II" respectively but also refers to correspondingly as "Hanging Day" and "Passage". The other five poems in the subsection have titles independent of "Procession" such as "Last Turning", "Recession", "Hunt of the Stone", "Space"

and "Seed". "Procession" in this study refers, as in the above light, to "Hanging Day" and "Passage" and forms the focus of the study. Depending on the context of study and to enhance the discussion at different points "Hanging Day" may be referred to also as "Procession I" and "Passage" as "Procession II".

The best criticism of "Procession" has been largely political and hardly treated the two poems one as integral to the other. Though the critics of the poem occasionally pay insubstantial attention to the concern of the poetry with some rites, their evaluation of its ritual nature is vitiated further because the issues in one poem are not seen as integral to those in the other one. "Procession I" and "Procession II" are facets of the same experience and an exploration of death and rites. The relationship between the two poems informs Soyinka's titling one as a sequel to the other. The poet mythologizes death in the sequence, inaugurates a long series of rites, piacular and funeral but focuses in the main on the rites of passage, reserving different parts of the poem for different aspects of the rites. "Procession" is therefore full of ritual elements which in turn highlight freshly many other formal properties of the poems that have either paled to insignificance or been misread in earlier studies of the poems.

Political criticism of "Procession" largely accounts for the topical and social nature of the sequence but hardly many of its formal elements. The trend in the criticism is obviously informed by reference to the historical context of the poetry, especially Soyinka's imprisonment. It sets the sequence as political prisoner poetry and recognizes it in the light of other poems in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972), a collection on Soyinka's prison experience. C. Tighe, Obi Maduakor, Tanure Ojaide, Biodun Jeyifo and Segun Adekoya have in their individual studies evaluated Soyinka's poetry sequence largely in this political light and represent directions in its criticism. Ojaide, Jeyifo and Adekoya recognize ritual forms in "Procession" but discount a lot from the richness of the ritual elements in the sequence.

According to Ojaide, "Procession" is topical, since Soyinka refers to the actual events which inform this poem. To the critic, the poetry is a social commentary on the perpetrators of inhumanity, who escape injustice. He adds also that in the poem Soyinka treats abuses and that the poem is anti-establishment, about the violators of his person and society and the evil nature of power (Ojaide 85-6). Tighe interprets "Procession" as political prisoner poetry. His political interpretation of the sequence is evident in his assessment of the psychology of the poet-prisoner and the comparison he draws between Soyinka and Arthur Koestler, another prisoner of conscience and the struggle by both to find an adequate language to deal with the experience of atrocities. Tighe (186) claims the "main problem in Soyinka's *A Shuttle in the Crypt* is that of creating a language for describing twenty-five months of solitary confinement and all its attendant horrors and dangers". The critic concludes about "Procession" that in the poem Soyinka openly despairs of being able to say anything about the hangings (Tighe 196).

Jeyifo (229) recognizes a heavy freight of mythologization and ritual complex about Soyinka's plays, prose and poetry and lists for the poetry in this category "Abiku", "A First Death-Day", "Idanre", "Dawn", "Death in the Dawn" and "Easter", all from *Idanre and Other Poems* (1967) but surprisingly none from *A Shuttle in the Crypt*. The critic reads the latter collection as political prisoner poetry and against the psycho-biographical condition of the poet. He states of "Bearings", "Procession" and "Seed" thus: "They all derive their power from a dialectical inversion of the psychic negations of life in the 'crypt,' accomplished through the incarcerated poet's astonishing but highly disciplined acts of imaginative and verbal extemporization of the unceasing and pervasive experience of adversity (Jeyifo 253).

Maduakor examines "Procession I" largely as political prisoner poetry but notes in passing a few elements of ritual in 'Procession II'. He concludes about the sequence thus: "In Part I of the poem the poet laments his inability to help his fellow-travellers on the road to death who fell by the wayside. In Part II he diverts our attention from the stench of infested earth by a look into the past" (Maduakor 52). The critic relates "Procession" to "Bearings", a section in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* and recognizes that the former treats death but skirts its preoccupation with the rites. Since his submission is filled with issues that are interrogated in this study, it is important to quote him at length. He starts by stating that, "If 'Bearings' is merely prefatory, the ritual proper begins with 'Procession,' a poem in which the poet mourns the death by hanging of five men serving life sentences. [...] The movement of the five convicts in a procession to their grave operates as a metaphor for man's journey from life to death" (Maduakor 51). Maduakor (51) concludes in the words following:

The poet plays on "passage" in the second part of the poem to emphasize the sense of "passage" as death and its meaning as a continuing process in an on-going ritual. For the five hanged men the rite is over but for the poet it is still continuing; and so he can pause in Part II to take a surrealistic leap into the world of childhood inhabited by old women working on the loom.

Maduakor misses some points and mixes up other ones about the ritual nature of "Procession". Take for instance, the critic's submission that the rite is over for the five men hanged but still continuing for the poet. As this study shall reveal the rite is not over for the five hanged prisoners but continues in "Passage". Maduakor (49) is right about the prose poem "Chimes of silence" and the idea that its organization is ritualistic and its basic metaphor a journey, a rite of passage. The poem's structure which enacts the death and rebirth pattern basic in rites of passage, this study argues, is depicted also in "Procession". "Procession" contains therefore the "topographical preface" which Maduakor identifies with "Bearing" and the sequence is as well a ritual proper and not just its beginning.

Adekoya recognizes the political and the ritual essence of "Procession". He concentrates on the political essence of "Hanging Day" and, to an extent, the ritual nature of "Passage". The critic submits that in "Procession I" "[t]he poet indicts the purblind Nigerian judiciary that still keeps capital punishment in its law books and questions the practice of making condemned prisoners pass through the tortuous motion of death several times before they are finally hanged" (Adekoya 220). Adekoya's evaluation of "Procession II" points to the preoccupation of the poem with death and ritual but slights the latter against the former: "'Procession II' is a post-mortem examination, a meditation on the mysteries of rites of life and death. The central and recurring image is passage, a metaphor for death and the gulf of transition from birth to death" (Adekoya 221). Adekoya, however, either overlooks, misrepresents or fails to underscore the significance of many elements of ritual in "Procession". He overlooks, for instance, the bearing that many issues in "Procession I" such as setting and nature have on its preoccupation with ritual and misrepresents elements in the poem such as pathetic fallacy and symbolism that serve its ritual theme. The critic fails to see the significance of other poetic elements alike that develop Soyinka's preoccupation with ritual in the poem. Adekoya's analysis of "Procession II" is however also not in the least free from some of the flaws identified in his analysis of "Procession I". He distances images with liturgical and religious echoes from their concern with rituals and stretches images of ritual beyond what their elasticity demands. An example in the second instance is the critic's simplification, in linguistic terms, of an aspect of the rites of passage conducted by the wise women whose essence is to underscore the elements of the supernatural. On the issue, Adekoya (224) states that, "Imaged as 'the mortar of fire', death is negated by the pool of water hanging "on the water's underside" and that the gerund 'hanging' is a clever lexical choice, for the death comes by it."

The issues in the lines above are however simply aspects of cult funeral and ritual drama and are corroborated by the statement in Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976) on such rites: "In the cult funerals the circle of initiate mourners, an ageless swaying grove of dark pines, raise a chant around a mortar fire, and words are taken back to their roots, to their original poetic sources when fusion was total and the movement of words is the very passage of music and dance of images" (Soyinka: 147). Adekoya (225) is right on many grounds in his conclusion about 'Procession II': "Like the beloved old women of the loom, Soyinka sings a dirge in 'Procession' to the memory of the five hanged prisoners. Playing the role of the earth-mothers, he employs the poetic art to perform death rites for the 'Bell ringers' and to challenge architects of death." But it needs be stated that the sequence depicts a rite of passage in which the persona is involved and which he attends in "Procession II". The rites involve other beings among them the women of the loom.

“Procession” is rich in ritual elements which its criticism cannot safely overlook. The sequence treats death, mythologizes the phenomenon and focuses on it as a rite of passage. Soyinka accentuates the preoccupation in the sequence with ritual elements such as the motifs of passage, symbols, incantatory rhythm, religious and cultural allusions, pathetic fallacy and pun among others. Applying the theory of formalism to the sequence reveals its ritual nature, illuminates the poetic devices listed above in ritual terms and highlights in addition in a fresh light other poetic figures that earlier critics of the poetry have discussed. Applying formalism to study the sequence requires a brief clarification on the theory.

A formalist study of ‘Procession’: Settling the old debate on form and content

Formalism evokes the idea of criticism focused solely on form rather than content of a literary work but this idea is not wholly true and has long been dispelled. The Formalists have long “freed themselves from the traditional correlation of ‘form-content’ and from the conception of form as an outer cover or as a vessel into which a liquid (the content) is poured” (Eichenbaum in Rivkin and Ryan 9). There is a wide agreement that the old distinction between form and content is no longer tenable. The recognition of the inseparability and reciprocity of the two is as old as Aristotle and has been reasserted in different words and sometimes in devious ways that the old use which refers “form” to elements of a verbal composition—rhythm, metre, structure, diction, imagery, and “content” to message, and doctrines has generally been long abandoned.

Wimsatt and Brooks are straight forward on the matter: “[f]orm’ in fact embraces and penetrates ‘message’ in a way that constitutes a deeper and more substantial meaning than either abstract message or separable ornament” (qtd. in Wellek 55). The unity of content and form survives also in the words of Harold Osborne (qtd. in Wellek 55):

The form of a poem, the prosodic structure, the rhythmic interplay, the characteristic idiom, are nothing any more when abstracted from the content of meaning; for language is not language but noise except in so far as it expresses meaning. So, too, the content without concrete existence, for when it is expressed in different language it is something different that is being expressed.

Osborne is quoted to have concluded on the matter in the following words: “The poem must be perceived as a whole to be perceived at all. There can be no conflict between form and content [...] for neither has existence without the other and abstraction is murder to both” (Wellek 55). “Form”, in the present study, is in the line of the Formalists’ thought as explained above. It is not paired with any other concept, it needs no correlation.

Ritual form and mythologization of death in 'Procession'

"Procession" is about death and rites of passage. In the poem, the persona mythologizes death, depicts characters and mourners as initiates involved in, and enacting a rite of passage, and gives many other elements involved in the enactment ritual overtones. The subject of the poem is a serious one and it is treated in a solemn and religious manner. The events in the poem are performed in an established or prescribed manner with the tripartite ritual structure of preparation, ritual death and rebirth. The words or acts constituting or accompanying the ceremony accentuate this ritual tone. "Hanging Day" treats preparation and ritual death while "Passage" focuses largely on the rites of passage for the dead and the two are marked by ritual elements. Thus, the sequence can essentially be described as ritual poetry.

Ritual poetry is a complex poetic genre and cannot be simply defined as 'that genre characterized by ritual elements.' The nature of the poetry is inherent in the character of ritual itself and so to define the genre, one needs to understand ritual as a subject. A ritual is a prescribed form or method for the performance of a religious or solemn ceremony. It can come in several ways one of which is a rite of passage or *rite de passage*. *Rite de passage* is a ritual signifying a change in status in the course of life of an individual, as one marking puberty, marriage, or death. The solemn or religious ceremony is performed in an established or prescribed manner and so are the words or acts constituting or accompanying it. It involves a form of death and is accompanied by a rite whose goal is rebirth or regeneration. Every rite of passage follows a basic structure. The three-part structure basic in rites of passage pattern is established by Hans Penner (qtd. in Maduakor 275): "entry into darkness (or preparation), followed by ritual death, which leads to a rebirth."

Ritual clearly has links with myth and religion that its discussion always raises points about the two. In a study like this however the relationship between myth and ritual or myth and religion needs no elaborate discussion but it suffices to simply state the relationship which three scholars have drawn between rites and these other phenomena. Joseph Campbell draws a link between myth and ritual in a context; Ogunjimi and Na'Allah between myth and religion in another context; and Emile Durkheim in his classic study *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) on related issues in yet another context. According to Campbell (45), "Myths are the mental supports of rites; rites, the physical enactments of myths". Ogunjimi and Na'allah (6) affirm the relationship between myth and religion: "[r]eligion itself embraces ritual, sacrifice and other routine activities that sustain the existence of the people". Durkheim (35) states that religion "is a whole formed of parts, a more or less complex system of myths, dogmas, rites and ceremonies".

In the present study, understanding the nature of ritual, the links between ritual and religion, myth, religion and any phenomenon raised in the work of Penner, Campbell, Durkheim, Ogunjimi and Na'Allah help to put our discussion of ritual

form in "Procession" in a proper perspective. Campbell's submission, for example, that physical enactments form part of rites suggests that drama is an element of ritual and it will not be surprising to discuss this element in "Procession".

Granted the complex nature of ritual as discussed above, 'ritual poetry', as a term, is open to discussion and will refer to that poetry which reflects the many sides of ritual. Thus, names vary widely by which the poetry is described, depending on what features of ritual a theorist has in mind. Marjorie Boulton (161) apparently has ritual poetry in mind in what she categorizes as "incantatory poetry", the kind of poetry "which seems to lend itself to chanting or solemn declamation; its pattern may be patterns chiefly of repetition; the lines are usually long; the subject is treated seriously, with something of a prophetic or exalted manner, possibly some hint of ritual, of liturgy..." Cuddon's dictionary of literary terms (417) also links incantation to ritual with 'incantation' as a literary term referring to "A formulaic use of words to produce a magical effect and to create an intensifying emotional temperature. The words may be chanted or spoken. It is very common in primitive literatures and is much used by sorcerers and witches, and also for ritual purposes as in a charm."

The reference of Ajibade Ajayi's terminology (29, 32) of "incantatory and divinatory poetry" and "divinatory and incantatory arts" reminds one of Boulton's definition of the genre with the former recognizing its religious nature. But since religion contains many elements among which are rites, the elements are also bound to give incantatory and divinatory poetry its complexion. The implication is that the poetry may further be defined by the nature of the rite it treats. Anthony C. Oha's definition follows this pattern; he defines ritual poetry as "a type of poetry (with dramatic and/or rhetoric property) usually performed as a tribute to the dead or a fallen hero" (qtd. in Alabere 31). Ritual poetry is therefore to be defined in relation to ritual and understood in the context of ritual as a phenomenon. It treats it as a serious subject, characterized by ritual structure and marked by elements of religion and myth. The poetry features elements of drama or performance and is presented in elegant language, filled with incantation, repetition and formulaic use of words.

Ritual structure in Soyinka's 'Procession'

"Procession" has a ritual structure. Central to it is the tripartite structure characteristic of a rite of passage. The poem has the customary three-part structure, of preparation, ritual death and rebirth. "Hanging Day" treats preparation and ritual death while "Passage" focuses largely on passage and rebirth. The preparation is depicted in the pervasive symbols of journey, darkness, flight and phenomenal events in the first section of the poem. The closing stanza of the section treats and summarizes the ritual death. "Hanging Day" captures the death of five prisoners and mythologizes this in different symbolic terms. Their death is suggested in at least two ways in the poem. Understated, their death by hanging is first hinted at in the persona's description

of the five prisoners as bell-ringers on the ropes to chimes of silence (42). The death of the five is reinforced in the persona's reference to them as the wretches damned to the pit (42).

"Passage" examines the cyclic nature of existence and the philosophy that the death of the five in "Hanging Day" is not the end of life but the beginning of another one. The poem focuses on the rites of passage of the five, conducted and attended by choric participants and communicants including the persona. The sequence, read in relation to "Hanging Day" establishes the actions in the poem as enactments of a myth and on the question of ritual of passage. Like "Hanging Day", "Passage" also captures this experience through symbols of passage, light, flight, cryptogram and other formal ritual patterns related to or contrasted with the ones in the first section.

Setting, symbolism and ritual elements in 'Procession'

The landscape of "Procession" is, *pars pro toto*, "Walls in sunspots" (41) but is not without some symbolic overtones. The landscape evolves as the womb, grove of initiation or preparation for both the persona and the five prisoners hanged. For the persona, it is a place of preparation as a communicant in a piacular rite and for the five as participants in a rite of passage. The logic of the symbolism is simple. The earth on which the five to be hanged walk is depicted as "hollow" and the prison as a pit, which "Echoes footsteps of the grave procession". One agrees with Maduakor and Ojaide that Soyinka puns off "grave" in the last image of confinement and first, that the word acts as an epithet, and secondly, that it evokes the literal meaning of a burial place. The second meaning, therefore, reinforces the imagery of confinement in the poem. The imagery of a grave (41), a hollow earth (41), a pit (42), a "siege of darkness" (42) and that of confinement and encirclement (42) resonant in the poetry makes the idea of live burial endure and suggests an element of ritual. The ritual symbolism inherent here will be clear bearing in mind that the experience symbolizes the first part of the tripartite structure of a ritual and the entry into darkness (or preparation). In the instance, the imprisonment of all the in-mates equates with the first part of the ritual experience and the death of the five prisoners in "Hanging Day" is a form of ritual death whose ritual significance is developed subsequently in "Passage".

For organizational reasons it is proper at this stage to settle another ritual element in "Hanging Day" because it has to do with another pun and relates to Soyinka's treatment of the death of the prisoners. Both Donatus Nwoga and Ojaide agree and are right that Soyinka puns on "Hanging Day" in the first poem. The phrase "Hanging Day" suggests two meanings: a day when a hanging takes place and a day when it took so long for the day to break or when certain natural laws are suspended. But beyond serving as a pun as hinted by the critics, the second meaning of the image advances ritual elements in the poem. The suspension of natural laws suggests the supernatural and carries with it a mythological meaning. Deaths or births of leg-

ends or supernatural beings are usually foreshadowed or followed by something extraordinary. Examples of this spectacle abound in religion, myth and literature. The death of Jesus Christ, as recorded for example, in Matthew Chapter 27 and verse 51 of the Holy Bible, was followed by an earthquake, rocks splitting, and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life (51). In the case of Julius Caesar in William Shakespeare's play of that title, the death of the eponymous character is presaged by a great storm. The occurrence of the supernatural in "Hanging Day" lends the development in the poem a supernatural aura and so the death of the five prisoners is mythologized.

Most certainly accompanying the hanging and the death of the five bell-ringers therefore are phenomenal events suggested by the poet in at least two different ways. Soyinka's portrayal of the events in this light is misread as are other events about the incident:

From inside the cell the poet sees a patch of the blue sky, the lushness of which gives a notion of Heaven's and nature's indifference to human suffering. The penitent prisoners who used to disturb the community with their prayers are silent. Their ignorance of the dark deed about to be done is inexcusable, for the "wall of prayer" is not supposed to be blind.... (Adekoya 219).

Admittedly, Soyinka's syntax could be complex as to make meaning ambiguous but it is not the case in the present context. Granted the phenomenal event and the suspension of certain natural laws suggested in the image of the hanging day in "Procession", this study offers another meaning of the image of "an eyepatch lushly blue" (41) that accentuates the idea that Soyinka mythologizes the death in the poem. The image has to do with the patch of sky seen by the persona without doubt but is here described as thick and heavily depressed. There is an element of pathetic fallacy here and the picture, contrary to Adekoya's submission above, reinforces the idea that the natural order responds to, and is affected heavily by the fate of the five prisoners.

Bird symbolism and ritual form in 'Procession'

Bird symbolism is a major poetic technique deployed by Soyinka in "Procession" and it deepens the concern of the poem with ritual. The symbol, next to the motif of passage, appears pervasive. Finely wrought and not loudly announcing itself the way the motif of passage does in the sequence, bird symbolism pervades the entire sequence but is surprisingly identified by Ojaide (86) in an instance simply analysed thus: "The poet is the bird whose wings are wet but still does some lamentation". The symbolism in "Procession" is complex and richer than the critic's evaluation of it and has more to recommend it for ritual form. It has more to do with the human soul and in many respects in the sequence the symbol weighs on the poem's preoccupation with soul travel and passage rites.

All societies grant that every human body shelters an inner being, the animating principle of life that is regarded as 'the soul'. The basic features of the soul are considered to be fixed but may be refined without adding anything truly essential and known to all religions is the whole system of collective representations related to the soul, its origin, and its fate however crudely organized (Durkheim 185). But while every winged being is symbolic of spiritualization, the beliefs relating to the nature of the soul and its destiny are expressed in the interpretation of the bird as symbolic of the soul very commonly in folklore all over the world. In this context, Cirlot (26, 27, 28) states that birds are frequently used to symbolize human souls and that it is common in mythology to speak of the soul's journey. Campbell (53) is helpful on the matter, especially on the origin of the soul, its nature and journey thus: "The mythology of the seven spheres and of the soul's journey from its heavenly home downward to its life on earth and, when that life was done, then upward again through all seven, is as old in this world as our civilization."

It must be noted also that while the distinct form and independence of the soul manifest themselves most clearly in death, the soul can leave the body also for brief periods. It is this temporary leave that the soul of the persona takes of his body to participate in the rites in "Procession". The persona in "Procession" participates in the ritual, at largely a spiritual realm. Therefore, Soyinka presents the human soul as a bird in the poetry sequence. The bird-soul symbolism recurs at least three times in the entire poem. The symbolism is first suggested faintly in the flight image in "Hanging Day" (42):

That I received them? That I
Wheeled above and flew beneath them
And brought them on their way
And came to mine, even to the edge
Of the unspeakable encirclement ?

The association of the bird with a soul is reinforced subsequently in "Passage" in the priest's words to the persona in the course of the rites when he, the persona is reminded of a childhood experience about the flight of bats and 'the shadow of ill' it cast. The experience, "If you pass under, trap a sky-soul bird / Your foot upon its shadow as it flies" is suggestive of bird-soul symbolism. The experience suggests that the bats in flight were the souls of some people escaping and that stepping on the shadows of the bats in flight would cause some birds to drop and thereby save the souls in flight.

Soyinka suggests that there is a link between the childhood experience about the bats in flight and the present rites and so the connection between the two requires a gloss. What Maduakor (51) states as "a surrealistic leap into the world of childhood inhabited by old women working on the loom" reinforces the present rites of passage and the souls of the five hanged men compare in the poet's imagination with

the departing souls of some people, recalling the ones symbolized in bats during the childhood experience.

The third bird symbolism, the one Ojaide (86) simplifies as the poet, has to do with soul travel and relates to the persona, his attendance and performance at the final rites of the hanged prisoners:

Spiralled on the unseen sunbeam
Pall-bearer to hereafter, I attend.
Mine the bedraggled wings
Raising a wind's lament to every step. (46)

The persona attends the ritual and participates in it in the realm of the spirit and it is therefore his soul which attends the rite.

Ritual drama and the motif of passage in 'Procession'

The ritual nature of "Procession" endures in Soyinka's focus in "Passage" on the pre-transition rites for the dead and those of their initiation into the cult of the ancestors. Involved in the ritual drama are the women of the loom, the persona and perhaps others. In the second poem, two separate rituals are suggested as performed by the women of the looms. If one carefully follows the poet's deployment of tense and time sequence, one rite is distinguished from the other. One ritual was apparently performed by the women before the death of the five bell ringers. This ritual is set immediately below:

Here old women spat their frail
Sibilant juice, and time was essence
Of the bitter nut seeping from withered gums.
We took their love. Through intertwine
Of owlish fingers on the loom, they gave
And wove a spell *against* this hour
And kept a vigil upon dearth and death. (44, added italics)

The above ritual is clearly distinguished from another rite presented in the poem. The second rite is performed following the death of the five prisoners, which is euphemistically described as the feast in the lines below:

The feast is done. See where they pass
Our old women of the loom, and they bring
On silent feet echoes in moult of earth
Indigo shawls filled with burrs of night
We lean forward to a drift of dirges
Reconciled in song to passing over
Across the mortar of fire. (44)

Because of the preposition “against” in the lines in which the first ritual is presented, it is easy to interpret the ritual performed by the wise women as efforts to prevent the execution of the prisoners but a closer look may reveal otherwise. Granted that the women superintend over death and wait always to perform the rites of passage, “against this hour” may simply mean “for this hour”. The phrase “against this hour” may mean no more than suggesting the women’s sense of duty. This thesis supports the inevitability of death which recurs in other images in the sequence. One image which supports the inevitability of death is suggested in the same poem in the idea that it is impossible to trap the shadow of a sky-soul bird as it flies.

The motif of passage, death and rebirth in ‘Procession’

“Procession” is replete with the motif of passage. The motif pervades the poem from the beginning through to the end, the most obvious ones being the movement of the five prisoners through the passage on their way to the gallows and their procession through other passages during the ritual performance conducted for them. The ritual involves the women of the loom and other choric participants including the persona. The image of passage evolves at every stage in the poem as symbolic. In “Procession I” the image is symbolic of the preparation of the five prisoners for ritual death. The preparation and the ritual death are symbolically to be understood in the pervasive symbol of darkness in the first section of the poem which is brought to a close by the ritual death hinted in the last stanza of “Hanging Day”. The point is made in the discussion of the symbolic nature of the physical landscape as advanced earlier in this study.

The motif of passage is continued and made more prominent in “Procession II”. Soyinka punctuates each phase of the ritual with the word “Passage” and reinforces his concern with passage in other images. This ritual passage is marked by a movement from darkness into light through passages over a mound, past a streak of earth on white-washed stones, through “straits of mildew”, before “craters newly opened into space”. Instructive about the concern with almost every passage is the question of death and renewal or rebirth, which the death of the five bell ringers is about. Consider for instance, the process of change or passage suggested in the opening lines of “Procession II”:

Passage. Earth is rich in rottenness [sic] of things
A soothing tang of compost filters
Through yeasting seeds, rain sodden
And festive fermentation, a sweetness
Velvety as mead and maggots. (43)

Intrinsic to the idea of fermentation in the lines above is the question of passage from death to life or vice versa. The images define the vital motion of the earth; decaying

seeds grow mould and yield another life. Against the decay is the process of growth and suggested is the idea that yeasting seeds are emblems of the earth which is constantly in motion. The image of life inheres in the concern with the growth on the seeds. The poet requests the need to look beyond the surface that we may understand the profound nature of things: "Shade your sight from glare / Of leavings on the mound. The feast is done." In the motif of passage above, Soyinka juxtaposes the images of life and death, sustains the paradox of existence and suggests that the death of the five prisoners is the beginning of another life.

Incantatory elements in 'Procession'

"Procession" is rich in elements of incantation and this element enhances its ritual nature. The elements are in the poet's deployment of repetition laced in some instances with rhetorical questions. The repetition in "Hanging Day" is inherent in its repetition in rhetorical questions shortly after which the incantatory element is played up in the repetition of "Passage" punctuated with "The feast is done". The effect of the repetition is the solemn atmosphere it gives which supports the serious nature of the subject.

"Procession" treats a serious subject. It is on death and the phenomenon is mythologized by the poet. Soyinka accentuates his preoccupation in the poem with religious elements, the patterns behind thinly veiled allusion but loud in the motif of passage which is characteristic of ritual. Elements of the religious are present but their disclosure is delayed in the elaborate motif of passage introduced in "Passage", in the first half of a stanza:

Passage. A finite step is turned
Aside to spare a bean-cake hive, swarm
Of ant-foragers—do not these
Hold a vital motion of earth? (43)

The religious elements are disclosed in the second half of the stanza:

Grooves in bean-cake scored
With indentations of the carious greed
Of priesthood- how well we know them—
Inheritors of the stricken hearth. (43)

Here Soyinka re-invents one common and popular religious idiom and locates same into the context of the procession suggested in the lines before.

In the first half of the stanza, Soyinka sustains the ritual nature of the poem through his deployment of the incantatory and formulaic use of "Passage" which he follows immediately with a ritual thesis or passage. In the second and final half of the same stanza, the poet reinforces the ritual thesis by deploying a religious ele-

ment and reinventing “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth”, one of the Beatitudes and a series of statements by Christ about those who are blessed. In the new context, Soyinka puns on “hearth”, and the “ant-foragers” are the priests.

Conclusion

“Procession” is a sequence in *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, a collection of poems on Soyinka’s prison experience. The context of the poetry makes its study from historical, political and biographical perspectives most appealing to critics. The critics recognize several major properties of the sequence which are given perfunctory examinations. “Procession” remains, however, a work of literature and the application of Formalism to it establishes its literariness and major properties. In the words of Rivkin and Ryan (3),
[l]iterature is not a window for looking at sociological themes or philosophic ideas or biographical information; rather, it is a mural or wall painting, something with a palpability of its own which arrests the eye and merits study. The manipulation of representational devices may create a semblance of reality and allow one to have the impression of gazing through glass, but it is the devices alone that produce that impression, and they alone are what makes literature literary.

While “Procession” creates a semblance of prison experience, a hanging and death, the devices in the poetry sequence suggest a persona’s personal mythology on death. Creation of personal mythology in poetry is not new in itself, as scholarship reveals that some poets usually create their own personal mythology and that there recur in their poetry certain images. The idea is put by Boulton (139–40) thus: “Many poets have favourite images that recur in their poems. Shelley’s works are full of friendly snakes, the sea and the sky; the poems of Donne, more earthly and more rational, are full of images drawn from science and theology. Wordsworth has a powerful favourite symbol of some solitary figure in impressive natural surroundings.” Nwoga (175) casts Soyinka in this mould with reference to *Idanre and Other Poems*: “The ‘Wisdom’ which he finds, and what I think emerges from his poems and gives significance to them is the recognition of the cyclic nature of death and resurrection destruction and new creation. If then the situation is catastrophic and largely sad, the informed vision holds on to the promise of renewal.”

This vision of Soyinka in *Idanre and Other Poems* also extends to “Procession” whose preoccupation supports the poet’s personal mythology on death. In “Procession” Soyinka mythologizes death and creates a ritual. Death in the poem holds a promise of renewal. The poet depicts death as inevitable and suggests its agency only varies. In the poem, the agency of death is the state political machinery, the victims are the five bell-ringers but the issues involved are rites, piacular and funeral. The poet reinforces his preoccupation with ritual by exploring in the poem the tripartite structure of ritual, preparation, ritual death and rebirth and strengthens same by

also deploying ritual forms such as motifs of passage, religious allusion, bird-soul symbolism, pathetic fallacy, repetition and other incantatory elements.

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