

Death and the Queen's Horsemen

Salawu Olajide
October 14, 2022



This September, in obeisance to the sharp drop in temperature that announced the end of summer in Toronto, I curled up on the lone couch in my apartment at York village and re-read Şóyínká's *Death and the King's Horseman*. Earlier in the month, in a packed cinema hall at the Toronto International Film Festival, surrounded by fellow Nigerians, I watched *Ẹlẹ́sìn Ọba: The King's Horseman*, the 2022 film adaptation of Şóyínká's play directed by the late Biyi Bándélé. And on the last weekend in September, at the Stratford festival, I sat, flanked by theater undergrads on one side and a law prof on the other, and watched the stage production of *Death and the King's Horseman* directed by Tawiah M'Carthy. Also, this September, the Queen of England, Queen Elizabeth II, died.

Aláàfin Adéyemí, the most recent Aláàfin, had himself departed a few months earlier.

Experiencing Şóyínká's words come alive in three media—page, stage, and screen—within the time-bind of one month heightened my already up-there appreciation of the man. And now this appreciation extends to the cast and crew of both screen and stage productions, who were able to preserve and translate the complex beauty of the story to their respective media. Biyi Bándele's decision to have the characters dialogue mostly in the Yorùbá language is a delightful validation of a much commented-on aspect of the text—that is, the Yorùbá characters do not speak mere English but the Yorùbá language through English words. It was moving to experience (and participate in) the collective "hmmn!" of the cinema audience when Olúndè (played by Déyemí Ọkánlàwọ̀n) cursed Ẹlẹ́sìn (played by Ọdúnladé Adékọ́lá) for going after "àjẹkù." The heft of this charge sits even more solidly in Yorùbá where the English translation of "left-overs" might have softened the edges of Ẹlẹ́sìn's abomination. And while the stage production stayed more faithful to the text, with dialogue

mostly delivered in the English language, the play cleverly and effectively uses sound (of drums, of feet, of voices) to communicate the Yorùbá context of its English words. The *Şóyínká* magic, on stage and on screen, retains its transformative power over the audience.

Ẹlẹ́şin, in Yorùbá ontology, is a consecrated position that offers an individual the opportunity to live his life with the same privileges that royalty affords, with an obligation to continue his service to a monarch as the latter transitions home. After a king transitions through death, Ẹlẹ́şin is expected to commit ritual suicide which allows him begin his service as the King's escort into the great beyond. Importantly, Ẹlẹ́şin does not "kill anybody and nobody will kill him. He will simply die." The ritual death of Ẹlẹ́şin, is a voluntary ascension cheerfully undertaken by an individual who has enjoyed kingly status and proceeds into the next phase of his journey with contentment. The ritual is heralded by ceremony and celebration that Ẹlẹ́şin is able to fulfill this role he has prepared for his whole life; it is a thing of honor to serve as Ẹlẹ́şin and the position devolves by inheritance. Ẹlẹ́şin, during his lifetime, is treated with the same reverence as the King he serves—he enjoys the social privileges of kingship, including as in the play, his choice of the women of the land.

Şóyínká's Death and the King's Horseman centers events that occur after the death of a monarch during the era of British colonization in Yorubaland. When the play opens, the monarch has been dead for a month, and waits in the in-between space of the living and the ancestors for his faithful horseman, Ẹlẹ́şin, to accompany him on the journey home. Unfortunately, on the morning of the day Ẹlẹ́şin is expected to transition, taken by a woman's beauty, he elects to exercise the privileges of his position one last time. So, he requests that the ritual of his death be postponed, to permit a quick marriage to the latest object of his interest. As the village prepares for this impromptu marriage, word is taken to the colonial office of the impending ritual suicide that must surely occur before the night's end. The colonial authorities deemed the sacrifice of the life of the living in homage to the dead a barbaric practice. So, the District Officer, driven by his commitment to English notions of right and wrong, set out to prevent what he deemed the wrongful death of the chief. In an abomination hitherto un contemplated, the District Officer successfully truncates Ẹlẹ́şin's transition, and the community is thrown into chaos at the prospect of their dead monarch proceeding into the afterlife without his horseman.

The story in *Death and the King's Horseman*, as *Şóyínká* mentions in the accompanying "Author's Note" to the play, is "based on events which took place in Ọyọ, ancient Yorùbá city of Nigeria in 1946." This incident was also the subject of Dúró Ládipò's play *Ọba Wàjà*, which preceded *Şóyínká's* project. Today, the play provides useful commentary on the mourning rituals around the death of Queen Elizabeth II. *Şóyínká* has famously cautioned against reading the *King's Horseman* as a "clash of cultures," an approach he describes as prejudicial and indicative of a "perverse mentality" (yikes!) So, I hesitate slightly to juxtapose the play's 1946 incident to the 2022 incident of the death of the Queen of England. Yet, this comparison is asking, begging even, to be made.

With the death of Queen Elizabeth II, we, descendants of those whose cultures were declared barbaric, have a chance to examine the veneration rituals of the British—what sacrifices England deems permissible in honor of its dead monarch—and we can offer our assessment of whether the English rites of passage, as the country mourns its monarch, meets our own sensibilities of what we consider humane or barbaric. In *Şóyínká's* play, after Simon Pilkings, the District officer, disrupts the ritual transition of Ẹlẹ́şin, as the chief sits, caged under the watch of British police officers, Ịyálọjà asks Pilkings, "In your land, have you no ceremonies of the dead?" Pilkings responds, "Yes. But we don't make our chiefs commit suicide to keep him company." Today, the death of Queen Elizabeth II renders Ịyaloja's question prescient, and Pilkings' self-righteous retort is unveiled as a half-truth, or perhaps a lie by omission. Because while England has not asked that members of its council of chiefs (read: parliament) sacrifice their lives in homage to the queen, it has thought nothing of demanding that the mass of citizens, especially its working class, make that sacrifice.

In honor of its late monarch, the government of the United Kingdom declared the closure of public services including hospitals, grocery stores, restaurants, and food banks that provide essential, life-sustaining services to the British masses, and this mandated closure was effected despite protestations from service providers in the affected industries. For example, The Independent, UK reports a doctor's comment, "I have the greatest respect for the Queen ... but when patients are waiting up to two years to be seen ... really?" Social media users also expressed their disagreement with the state-imposed disruption (and endangerment) of the lives of citizens for the sake of performing mourning. And some institutions, especially food banks, elected to remain open in defiance of the state mandate. How are we to understand that the government of the United Kingdom is willing to risk and sacrifice the lives and wellbeing of the British masses to ensure the deceased queen its version of a befitting burial?

It is particularly important to note that the events of September 2022 differ in a key way from the 1946 incident in Yorubaland. The sacrifices that the British public was forced to assume in the wake of the queen's death, the risk that the state's ritual of mourning posed to the lives of average citizens were not voluntarily assumed by the risk-bearers. Many citizens, who had to bear the burden of the deprivation from much needed public services, raised concerns about the severity of limitations the state's mourning mandates imposed on their lives and livelihood, yet the closures largely proceeded as planned. In other words, these citizens were, in a sense compelled to act as Ẹlẹ́ṣin Ọba, horsemen tasked to pave the Queen's path home with laudatory performance of sacrifice. Except unlike the Ẹlẹ́ṣin of the Ọyọ kingdom, these persons were not afforded the privilege of living like royalty in the period of the queen's life and did not voluntarily assume the burden of sacrificing for her death.

In the person of the average British citizen who is forced to live a stalled existence in homage to a famously out-of-touch imperialist class, we see how ritual sacrifice can be an undue, unfair burden, not unlike the charge the colonial officers levied against the Ọyọ people those many years ago. And, as if to clarify any ambiguities around which interests are prioritized by the government of the United Kingdom—citizens' rights on the one hand and the reputation of the monarchy, on the other—Police officers in the UK went to task arresting citizens for expressing anti-monarchist sentiments during the burial ceremonies. Where, seventy years ago, the British declared indigenous culture of voluntary (and even honorable) self-sacrifice barbaric, today it insists that forcing citizens to risk their lives and livelihood is acceptable sacrifice that cannot be shirked by the risk-bearers.

In the play, *Şóyínká* comments on the hypocrisy of the British refusal to understand indigenous notions of sacrifice and self-death. The story is situated during the period of the second world war, even though the historic incident upon which the play is based occurred a year after the end of the war. By setting the date back a few years, *Şóyínká* has his characters draw on the self-sacrifice of military personnel at war to push back against the colonial claim that all suicide is wrong. Olúndé disputes the claim of a civilized, British proscription against self-sacrifice: "Is it that [ritual suicide] is worse than mass suicide? Mrs. Pilkings, what do you call what those young men are sent to do by their generals in this war? Of course you have also mastered the art of calling things by names which do not remotely describe them." Also, in the story of the captain who blew up himself in a ship to presumably prevent further destruction of coastal communities, the play makes the point that even individual suicide can be perceived as deeply honorable when it is done in service of a community, especially when it is done to forestall widespread disaster. Yet the British withheld this badge of honor in their evaluation of Ẹlẹ́ṣin's commitment to the welfare of his community.

In the *King's Horseman*, the District Officer asks Ẹlẹ́ṣin, "do you not find great contradictions in the wisdom of your own race?" Pilkings, acknowledging the Yorùbá understanding of the grim reality of death, could not (or perhaps refused to) comprehend that sacrifice like Ẹlẹ́ṣin's could be undertaken willingly, joyfully even. Today, I pose the same question to the government of England: "Do you not find contradictions in the wisdom of your own race?" That England is willing to sacrifice the lives and

well-being of hundreds of thousands of its citizens for the sake of performing mourning for the life of one person, that the state will foist duty on unwilling horsemen who need to eat and free their bodies from disease reveals an irony. In the mourning rituals curated by the government of the United Kingdom, we see a country towing the same path it declared barbaric seventy years ago, and going even further than those it described as savages.

England, do you not find great contradictions in the wisdom of your own race?

Olaoluwa Oni is a PhD candidate researching the intersections of law, literature, film, and other popular culture. She practices as an attorney in New York. Her debut novel, *The yNBA* is sold in bookstores across Nigeria.

OLONGO
AFRICA

