Rituals – A Social Strategy for Communal Catharsis in Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests*

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**Abstract**

Rituals that are designed for the benefit of social institutions which take them to a spiritual plane, giving them special significance in the society are considered as social rituals. A ritual is a sequence of activities involving miming, singing, dancing and use of objects performed in a place, specially arranged for the purpose, in a set order. Ritual becomes part of any cultured society which helps the past to meet with the present for a dynamic future. Soyinka features a number of such social rituals in his *A Dance of the Forests*. Rituals like welcoming, gathering of the tribes, marked by mask dance and the understanding of the past through magic are exemplified by Soyinka. He brings in beings from three different worlds – world of the deities, world of the living and world of the dead – trying to bridge the past and the present for a better future. Rituals help in understanding the cultural constraints and the difficulty that arise from understanding the society. These rituals apart from bringing the community together, allows its members to discuss their follies and foibles and brings in a cathartic effect for a better future of the community and its members. This paper aims at focusing on the significant role played by rituals in *A Dance of the Forests*.

**Key words:** Rituals, culture, Society, Catharsis.

Rituals have their origins in the primitive man’s attempts to come to terms with the vast immensity of the cosmos. Rituals are designed for the benefit of the society. They are projected in the plays by the ‘passage-rites of hero-god’. Ritual is “a projection of man’s conflict with forces which challenge his efforts to harmonize with his environment, physical, social and psychic”. [Myth, Literature and the African World, Wole Soyinka. Pg. 1]

Soyinka, born in a culture bound society had shown the richness of his culture, through the rituals presented in his plays. Rituals are sequence of activities involving miming, singing, dancing, use of objects performed in a place, specially designed for the purpose. Ritual is part of a cultured society which helps the past to meet with the present for a dynamic future. *A Dance of the Forests* is a typical example of the past meeting with the present to discuss a prosperous future.

*A Dance of the Forests* is a play which was enacted during the Nigerian independence in 1960. This play talks of power, corruption, creativity and regeneration that are part of any society. Soyinka wanted to handle a complex play like *A Dance of the Forests* on the occasion of Nigerian Independence to tell his own people that it was not time for complacent rejoicing and self-appreciation but time for checking their worth and for positive future construction. Soyinka employs the images of ancestors to question the valour of the past in bringing together national identity. The play involves the past, the present and the future vision of a tribal community of people, their gods and spirits. The dramatist has constructed the play around a social ritual “The Gathering of the Tribes” – organized by the community for rejoicing the richness of their culture.

The play is divided in to two parts, apart from that there is a small prologue providing a synopsis of the play, the major characters and happenings. Just before the play begins the ‘alive community’ decide to hold a “gathering of the tribes” and ask the Forest head, a god, in helping them by sending some illustrious guests from the world of the dead. Aroni, the alter ego of Forest Head has sent a warrior and his pregnant wife who lived in the court of a twelfth century king, Matakharibu. The warrior was sold as a slave for his climbing ability which he himself could not do. In the past, as a court poet to Matakharibu, he had pushed his novice from the roof of the palace where they had been sent to rescue the queen’s pet canary. Rola, the present day courtesan, has driven one of her lovers to murder the other and then committed suicide. In her previous incarnation as Matakharibu’s wife the king’s chieftain brother, whom Matakharibu seduces to make her his queen. The warrior’s pregnant wife was drowned in a river. But the organizers of the gathering refused to accept the Dead man and Dead woman, as their guests and have driven them away using diesel smoke.

There are three main characters who had also escaped in to the forest – Demoke, Rola and Adenebi. They were linked to the dead people in the past and have also committed crimes in the present. Demoke, the carver of trees has murdered his apprentice out of jealousy for his climbing ability which he himself could not do. In the past, as a court poet to Matakharibu, he had pushed his novice from the roof of the palace where they had been sent to rescue the queen’s pet canary. Rola, the present day courtesan, has driven one of her lovers to murder the other and then committed suicide. In her previous incarnation as Matakharibu’s queen, she ordered the castration of the warrior and the murder of his wife. Adenebi who in his previous birth, after having accepted bribe from a slave trader had prevailed upon the king to sell his soldiers as slaves, and in the present, permits a lorry to be overloaded – after accepting bribe this time too – and becomes responsible for the death of seventy five people. The Forest Head

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disguised as Obaneji has attracted the three guilty humans into the forest to reveal their past to them and to make them learn from their mistakes.

Aroni has taken the dead pair into his fold, assuring them a due welcome. As the dead pair are welcomed, the dead pregnant woman unburdens herself by giving birth to an ‘abiku’, a child born only to die and which is then returned to its mother again. ‘The case’ of the dead pair and the various spirits representing the natural resources are heard as well. The rituals – the welcoming and the Gathering expose and satirise the politicians and the men of power in the past and present who use rituals for their own selfish ends.

The play becomes more complex at the end as Soyinka brings together various symbolic plots and images. When the play comes to an end, two of the human protagonists undergo ‘catharsis’ and emerge as purified souls as they learn from their past, understand the present and have a vision of the future.

Soyinka exemplifies through his play A Dance of the Forests that a humane world is possible only when man understands that there is a pessimistic force in him and then tries to transform it into an optimistic one. The play taken for analysis exemplifies this view through the paradigm of a social ritual. The mask and dance and the revelation of the past form part of the social rituals.

Ritual is an activity where the past meets with the present in order to create a better future. The Dead woman has thought that the community gathering is the appropriate place to come to terms with the living as what belongs to them. The living do not recognize the dead pair, which shows their insensitivity to come to terms with their past and to think about their future.

Inspite of the ‘Ritual of Gathering’ of the human community, no good happens. To show that kind of a ritual is not the focus of the playwright. So he provides the centre stage to Forest Head, a divine character, who leads the three human protagonists to their redemption. These three represent the human community with all their follies and foibles. Through them Soyinka dramatizes social action and human behavior that would redeem mankind and regenerate and rejuvenate humanity. This thought exemplifies itself in the selection of only those who are guilty of murder – Demoke, Rola and Adenebi.

The Forest Head leads Demoke and Rola to the “welcoming of the Dead” – a social ritual – to give them a vision of the future. He orders that the Dead woman be relieved of her centuries of burden, the child, in her womb. The Dead woman brings an abiku child which according to the Yoruba is born only to die. It is a symbol of both the spirit of the future and the memory of the past and do not convey a happy future. The mother and the child, together stand for a complex symbol. Through the centuries of pregnancy, the child is not dead even though the mother is dead.

The stories of Demoke and Rola emphasize the difference between true ritual that connects the human spirit with the spirit of nature and cosmic forces and false ritual that is constructed for temporary and selfish gains. Demoke, the artist and Rola, the whore, both are cured and chastened, at the end, of the play emerge wiser than before. This act of catharsis in the mind of the people is the prime aim of any social ritual which is part of any culture, which understands that the past act of the community reflects on its future. If this is left unchecked, the future of the community is at stake. This idea is clearly shown through the characters which understand their past and undergo a change of mind only to experience a better future.

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