CHAPTER THREE

Cultural Hybridity

This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy. Homi K. Bhabha

On first impression, Death and the King's Horseman (1975) appears to be a play about a clash of two cultures – between African and European beliefs, tribal paganism and Western civilization. I would contend, however, that the play conveys much more than a picture of this simplistic dichotomy. It is indisputable that the play does portray the colonizer's assumption of authority to define the cultural identity of the colonized subject, and the natives' efforts in resisting such intervention in their cultural practices. I would argue, however, that in addition to this, the play raises a more important issue. In my opinion, the more pressing issue that Wole Soyinka's play foregrounds is the role of the 'in-between' space – the liminal space between white and black cultural traditions or between the colonizer and colonized, as well as within the native African community – as a dynamic site where cultural differences are engaged in a dialectic interaction and where new cultural identities are negotiated into existence. Soyinka himself has taken issue with the common reductionist interpretation that African plays portraying a confrontation between two different races and cultural traditions are merely that. He remarks in the "Author's Note" to the play:

The bane of themes of this genre is that they are no sooner employed creatively than they acquire the facile tag of 'clash of cultures'. A prejudicial label which, quite apart from its frequent misapplication, presupposes a potential equality in every given situation of the alien culture and the indigenous, on the actual soil of the latter. (SP 144)
The common "facile tag" of a "clash of cultures" presumes that the two different cultural traditions should be compared according to the same universal standards, and that the exercise would present a winner superior to the other. Such a comparison fails to acknowledge the distinctly different natures of the two cultural traditions, and the different views that exist within even the same community. The notion of a clash suggests a confrontation that aims to produce a hierarchical relationship where one party dominates the other. I would contend that rather than such a confrontation, the interaction between cultural differences in the play is much more complex than the mere exercise of determining which is superior. This interaction, in my opinion, is dialogic and opens up the possibility of challenging the hierarchical boundaries between the colonizer and the colonized, between different classes within African society, and thus allows the postcolonial subject the opportunity to develop a culturally hybrid identity that does not subscribe to colonial discourse.

In Soyinka's play, Death, Elesin Oba, the king's chief horseman, prepares to commit ritual suicide as required by the ancient Yoruba culture. When the king dies, mourning goes on for about a month before he is buried. Just before the burial, his chief horseman also leaves the world of the living to accompany the Alaafin, his master, in the journey to the afterlife. The Yoruba community views any failure to perform and complete this ritual as a failure to appease the deceased. This would deny the living community the favor and blessing of the dead and could even bring calamity onto the people (Gibbs 117-8). Elesin is thus seen as a revered and powerful figure by his community because of the heavy burden he has to bear. This African worldview, however, is foreign and meaningless to the British District Officer, Simon Pilkings. Both he and his wife, Jane, see the rite as mere "mumbo-jumbo" (SP 164). Their view is clearly demonstrated by the irreverence they show toward the egungun festival. They don the egungun gear confiscated from a recent death ritual to a masque, and even
expect their costumes to be so unique that they will bag the first prize in the "Best Costume" competition. The egungun ancestral masks and costumes may mean no more than exotic, fancy dress to these Christian British. However, the locals see their indifferent act as a sacrilege of native beliefs and practices. Even Sergeant Amusa, who is a Moslem African and therefore does not participate in ancient Yoruba rituals, is reluctant to touch or even look at the costumes, especially when they are insulted in such manner by foreigners. It is probable that Amusa's fear of the egungun costumes and masks is not a dramatic exaggeration by the playwright but a reflection of the reverence the Yoruba community has toward the festival. Ulli Beier's account of the egungun culture in Introduction to African Literature offers a glimpse of just how seriously Nigerian society took this tradition at one time. "Its main function is to deal with the worship and appeasement of the dead. The great masks are impersonations of ancestors. They are sacrosanct and to touch them could mean death" (Beier 244).\(^5\)

Though Elesin understands the importance of his role in fulfilling the suicide ritual, his fear towards death makes him a reluctant candidate. Pilkings' intervention comes in the nick of time when he interrupts the ritual and arrests the chief horseman who is already in a trance and halfway through the symbolic journey to the afterlife. Elesin is locked away for the night until the District Officer decides on the former's fate the next day. Deluded by his fear of death, the chief horseman sees this intervention as a divine sign that delivers him from his duty. He realizes the error of his cowardice only too late when the body of his firstborn son, Olunde, is brought before him. Olunde has defied the local custom prohibiting the chief horseman's heir from leaving the land when he went to study medicine in England. However, he has not forgotten his African roots completely. He returns to his homeland the moment he hears of the king's death to pay his final respects to his father. When he discovers that Elesin has failed to fulfil the suicide ritual, thus dishonoring the family and endangering the community, the heir
steps in to take his father's place. The play ends on a tragic note. When Elese discovers the consequence of his cowardice, he takes his own life but his, unlike Olunde's, is a death without honor.

Though the play concerns an African setting, I find Edward W. Said's conception of 'Orientalism' relevant in describing the imposition of colonial authority on the African subject. Pilkings exercises the kind of assumed authority that the European 'self' professes over the Oriental 'other' and sees his relation to the natives as a binary opposition. Ania Loomba draws a similar connection in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*:

> Said shows that this opposition is crucial to European self-conception: if colonised people are irrational, Europeans are rational; if the former are barbaric, sensual, and lazy, Europe is a civilisation itself, with its sexual appetites under control and its dominant ethic that of hard work. [...] This dialectic between self and other, derived in part from deconstruction, has been hugely influential in subsequent studies of colonial discourses in other places – critics have traced it as informing colonial attitudes towards Africans, Native Americans, and other non-European peoples. (47)

Thus the Yoruba suicide ritual in British colonial eyes is deemed barbaric and uncivilized compared to the colonizer's self-perceived rationality and civilized culture. I would further contend that this difference, based on an opposition of values and standards, whereby the colonizer actually believes that he occupies the superior half of the equation, inevitably affects both parties. The binary equation locates and frames the colonized subject in the opposite and negative side, therefore always relegating the subject to an inferior position in the relationship. This perspective of seeing difference as opposites is used by the colonizer as a means of transferring his fears and weaknesses onto the other, thus keeping himself in the superior side of the equation. But the dominant party is not entirely unaffected by its imperialism. As Aimé Césaire points out
in *Discourse on Colonialism*, even the colonizer is transformed by his exercise of authority and power. Césaire asserts that the process of colonization does as much, if not more, damage to the colonizer as it does the colonized. His contention is that the colonizer who conquers and subjugates others is already acting on an evil nature that is not without its consequence.

What am I driving at? At this idea: that no one colonizes innocently, that no one colonizes with impunity either; that a nation which colonizes, that a civilization which justifies colonization – and therefore force – is already a sick civilization that is morally diseased, that irresistibly, progressing from one consequence to another, one repudiation to another, calls for its Hitler, I mean its punishment.

(Césaire 17-8)

Césaire goes on to argue that the colonizer sets himself on a course of further moral degradation, whether or not he is conscious of it, when he persists in spreading and establishing colonialism.

[Colonization] dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as *an animal*, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform *himself* into an animal. It is this result, this boomerang effect of colonization, that I wanted to point out. (Césaire 20)

Such an extent of the "boomerang effect", whereby the colonizer becomes an "animal" himself, is not explicit in Pilkings (Césaire 20). Even so, there are signs implying that Pilkings has not learned anything from the incident. At the end of the play, the District Officer is only sorry that he has failed to prevent Elesin and Olunde from taking their own lives. The colonizer regrets that he has failed to maintain constant control over his
subjects. He refuses to recognize that his intervention in the suicide ritual is to some extent responsible for the tragic deaths of both father and son. We see in the final scene of the play Pilkings trying to blame the leader of the market women, Iyalokoja, for the deaths. This suggests that given a similar situation in future, Pilkings is likely to exercise the same kind of colonial paternalism.

Meanwhile, Olunde is also affected by the colonial encounter but his experience has taught him to recognize the flaws in European culture, proclaimed to be superior by Pilkings. Having gone to medical school in England has opened his eyes to the way in which Europeans perceive Africans and foreign culture. Unlike Lakunle in *The Lion and the Jewel* who blindly adopts European ideas and practices after some exposure to them in the city, Olunde exercises more discretion in selecting his influences. Although Pilkings was instrumental in helping Olunde attain medical training in England, the latter returns to Africa a more discerning and empowered native who is able to challenge his white benefactor's colonial views. "I discovered that you have no respect for what you do not understand," he tells Jane when he meets her at the ball (*SP* 192). His conclusion is substantiated by what he sees at the costume party: he sees her desecrating the Yoruba ancestral costume by wearing it to the masque. He points out to Jane that while Europeans may be masters at surviving the devastation of war, or generally anything that threatens their lives and lifestyles, they should "at least have the humility to let others survive in their own way" (*SP* 195). He maintains that his view is not the result of disillusionment with the devastation caused by the war but based on his long scrutiny of British colonial attitude. "Don't think it was just the war. Before that even started I had plenty of time to study your people. I saw nothing, finally, that gave you the right to pass judgement on other peoples and their ways. Nothing at all" (*SP* 196).
We also see in Olunde a merging and co-existence of selected elements from two different cultural traditions. This is illustrated by the different views that Jane and Olunde hold on the incident at the port. In Scene Four, Jane recounts a recent local incident when a captain had to blow up the ship because it was becoming a threat to the lives of hundreds of coastal residents. The captain had to remain on board to light the fuse. He had no time to devise an alternative solution and so made the decision to save others even if it meant sacrificing himself (SP 192). While Jane thinks it was a wrong move, Olunde understands the captain's decision. Jane maintains there was no way of knowing for sure that the ship would really harm the people in the area. Olunde says the captain could not afford to take the risk of doubting and allowing the threat to persist, like the proverbial time bomb ticking away, while he figures out a better solution. The incident is a parallel to the suicide ritual that Elesin is duty-bound to fulfil. Pilkings and his colleagues may understand the captain's call but are unable to appreciate the similar responsibility in Elesin's case. They do not see the intangible and speculated threat coming from an unfulfilled traditional ritual that is all too alien to them. Olunde, on the other hand, is able to see the rationale in both the captain's decision and the chief horseman's destiny. Thus when Pilkings insists that he is "saving" Elesin, Olunde remarks: "What can you offer him in place of his peace of mind, in place of honour and veneration of his own people?" (SP 194).

By standing up to Pilkings to defend his Yoruba identity and tradition, it is obvious that despite the European education and culture that Olunde has been exposed to while in England, he has not severed his African roots. Though educated in Western medical science, the main objective of which is to save lives, Olunde has not rejected the significance of the suicide ritual to the Yoruba community. He is straddling two different, and at times conflicting, cultural traditions at the same time. This positioning places him in a site or an interstice that is neither distinctly African nor European but an
ambivalent state that leads to a dialectic interaction between cultural differences. Olunde learns to understand the way the colonizer perceives his African subject. As a result of his training in the English school, he adopts some British ways and views while at the same time resisting and challenging others. Similarly, he rejects part of his African cultural heritage, particularly that which binds him to the land, but is willing to give his life to protect his family's honor and the community's well-being when the need arises. On the one hand, he chooses to disregard his Yoruba ties to pursue a vocation in medical practice. He would likely have remained in Britain if not for news of the king's death and the impending ritual his father is expected to fulfil. On the other hand, Olunde also knows the difference between a vocation and a calling. As the heir of the chief horseman, his calling is to preserve his family honor and carry on the family duty to the community. His decision at the end of the play to complete the ritual reveals the ultimate priority he places in his calling.

Olunde's critical view of British paternalism and his decision to complete the suicide ritual himself may give the impression that he is more African than European. This is to a large extent true, but I would maintain that it does not nullify the effect of British influences on him. His experience in interacting with European cultural ideas and practices remains an inextricable part of his new identity, which is hybrid in nature and the result of the cross-cultural dialectic space that he represents. This space, in my opinion, is analogous to Bhabha's notion of the 'third space'. I would posit that the interstice where this dialectic process is located also has strong similarities to Soyinka's own concept of the 'fourth stage'. Both sites are passages connecting different and conflicting realms. To Bhabha, the third space, located in the interstice between the colonizer and the colonized, offers the latter the avenue to challenge colonial discourse and establish relations without hierarchies. As he notes in his essay, "Culture's In Between":

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At the point at which the precept attempts to objectify itself as a generalised knowledge, or a normalising hegemonic practice, the hybrid strategy or discourse opens up a space of negotiation where power is unequal but its articulation may be equivocal. Such negotiation is neither assimilation nor collaboration. It makes possible the emergence of an 'interstitial' agency that refuses the binary representation of social antagonism. Hybrid agencies find their voice in a dialectic that does not seek cultural supremacy or sovereignty.

(34)

Peter Childs and Patrick Williams, in Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory, have aptly pointed out the distinction between cultural diversity and cultural difference in Bhabha's argument. While the former implies a passive recognition of the presence of different cultures, the latter involves a dialectic interaction taking place between cultural difference.

Cultural diversity, like multiculturalism, is a containing term that for Bhabha denies contestation and hybridity through its assertion of simple plurality and the existence of pre-given cultural forms. By contrast, cultural difference focuses on the ambivalence of cultural authority, the split between on the one hand the demand for a cultural tradition and community, and on the other the political need to negate this homogeneity in the negotiation of new cultural demands.

(Childs and Williams 142)

Bhabha sees the third space, where cultural difference is negotiated, as "a place of agency and intervention because it is here that all cultural meaning is constructed, and in that sense located" (Childs and Williams 142). This suggests that there is no 'original' meaning or 'pure' culture, and that culture is instead defined as a result of that difference that emerges when one culture is confronted with another.
To grasp the extent of the parallel between Bhabha's third space and Soyinka's fourth stage, we must also look at the Yoruba myth on the relationship between gods and humans, and particularly the deity Ogun. In *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Soyinka expounds on the ancient Yoruba myth of how the first deity, "the progenitor of god and man" was betrayed by his slave, who "rolled a huge boulder on to the god" and threw the god into the abyss in countless fragments (28). These fragments, or "shards", became the multiple godheads that form the pantheon of Yoruba mythology. Each deity has a different role, not dissimilar to the saints revered in Roman Catholicism. The most important and "creative" fragment closest to the original god went into Ogun, "who manifests a temperament for artistic creativity matched by technological proficiency" (Soyinka 1976: 28). It was Ogun who dared and succeeded in forging through the abyss separating gods and humans, thus earning himself the crown as king over both.

Yet none of them [gods], not even Ogun, was complete in himself. There had to be a journey across the void to drink at the fount of mortality though, some myths suggest, it was really to inspect humanity and see if the world peopled by the mortal shards from the common ancestor was indeed thriving. But the void had become impenetrable. A long isolation from the world of men had created an impassable barrier which they tried, but failed, to demolish. Ogun finally took over. Armed with the first technical instrument which he had forged from the ore of mountain wombs, he cleared the primordial jungle, plunged through the abyss and called on the others to follow. (Soyinka 1976: 28-9)

While among mortals, Ogun led the people who crowned him their king to many battle victories until one tragic incident when, drunk with palm wine, he could no longer distinguish which was friend and which was foe and ended up slaying everyone in his path (Soyinka 1976: 29).
Ogun thus is the embodiment of paradoxical qualities. His courage and success in leading fellow gods through the abyss represents a "knowledge-seeking instinct" that hopes to establish a sense of harmony, or a coming to terms with both the divine and the human (Soyinka 1976: 27). His capacity to forge the necessary tool to cut through the dense barrier, contrasted to his later tragic mistake while in a drunken stupor, makes him "the essence of [both] destruction and creativity" (Soyinka 1976: 27). Soyinka calls this passage a "chthonic realm", or an intermediary space, which links the three different states of being – the ancestral, the living and the unborn – in Yoruba mythology. The playwright sees the stage as an intermediary space, a site where rituals are performed and where drama, thus, assumes a dynamic role in expressing African metaphysics. It is important to note that Soyinka does not perceive the Yoruba belief in the intermingling and co-existence of the past, present and future, or the ancestral, the living and the unborn, to be similar to the European conceptualization of this temporal element in the latter's explanation of its metaphysical order (Soyinka 1976: 43-4). Soyinka argues that the Yoruba order involves a "contemporaneous existence":

The belief of the Yoruba in the contemporaneous existence within his daily experience of these aspects of time has long been recognised but again misinterpreted. It is no abstraction. The Yoruba is not, like European man, concerned with the purely conceptual aspects of time; they are too concretely realised in his own life, religion, sensitivity, to be mere tags for explaining the metaphysical order of his world. If we may put the same thing in fleshed-out cognitions, life, present life, contains within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn. All are vitally within the intimations and affectiveness of life, beyond mere abstract conceptualisation. (Soyinka 1976: 143-44)

A hybrid culture may be seen in the same light as the Yoruba belief. The former is not a mere concept but an embodiment of the material and conceptual elements derived from
all sources of influence, from both the colonizer and the colonized. The product of hybridization, as in the case of Olunde, is not merely symbolic but contains a manifestation, whether in the material, conceptual or spiritual state, of a mixture of African and British influences.

The extent of honor and veneration accorded to the king's chief horseman and the significance of the suicide ritual in Yoruba culture compelled Olunde to insist on completing the ritual. His decision is best understood in the context of Yoruba mythology. The journey into the afterlife that Elesin, and his heir, are expected to take aims to appease the dead and ensure the wellbeing of the living, thus maintaining a kind of harmonious co-existence between the past, present and future, or the ancestral, the living and the unborn. In my opinion, this ritual undertaken by the chief horseman or his heir is a process where the conditions of being for the three states are negotiated and this interaction takes place in the interstitial space that exists between each state. This space is similar to Soyinka's notion of the fourth stage or chthonic realm, the fourth area of existence and site of transition connecting the ancestral, the living and the unborn in African metaphysics. There is a parallel between Ogun's journey and that taken by the king's chief horseman or his heir. The journey is far from easy. It exacts from the chosen quester courage, strength, commitment and wit. However, unlike Ogun, Elesin does not have what it takes to plunge into the abyss. Elesin is determined to wed one more wife before he proceeds with his journey into the afterlife. He argues that it is the final attempt by man to unburden himself in order to be able to leave the world of the living lightly, as well as to leave a legacy with the world of the living:

Who does not seek to be remembered?

Memory is Master of Death, the chink

In his armour of conceit. I shall leave

That which makes my going the sheerest
Dream of an afternoon. Should voyagers
Not travel light? Let the considerate traveller
Shed, of his excessive load, all
That may benefit the living. (SP 159)

While it is actually the fear of death that prompts Elesin to cling on to the world of the living, he tries to justify it by referring to the Yoruba worldview of the co-existence between the dead, the living and the unborn, pointing out how his wish to seed the earth one more time is analogous to acting out the link between the three realms.

Iyalooja, the wise woman in the market, sees the implications of such a request. However, she concedes to let Elesin have the young woman, who is betrothed to her own son, because she recognizes the significance of the chief horseman's impending journey to the community. She does not want to disappoint him and worse, incur his anger and curses. She points out to the other women at the market that "[only] the curses of the departed are to be feared" (SP 161). Elesin may still be among the living when he makes his request but he is at the same time also a man very close to crossing the boundary of two worlds. He would soon, in less than twenty-four hours, fulfil his duty and enter into the world of the dead, whose curses humans are to fear. Iyalooja is aware of this and is compelled to forsake her son's right, and his fiancée's, to appease the chief horseman. She explains: "The claims of one whose foot is on the threshold of their abode surpasses even those of blood. It is impiety even to place hindrances in their way" (SP 161). Iyalooja's compliance with Elesin's wishes is also an acknowledgement of the Yoruba belief in the co-existence of the three realms of being:

Oh you who fill the home from hearth to threshold with the voices of children, you who now bestride the hidden gulf and pause to draw the right foot across and into the resting-home of the great forebears, it is good that your loins be
drained into the earth we know, that your last strength be ploughed back into the womb that gave you being. (SP 161)

Though reluctant to give in to Elesef's request at first, she changes her mind as she ponders on the significance of the union. "The fruit of such a union is rare. It will be neither of this world nor of the next. Nor of the one behind us. As if the timelessness of the ancestor world and the unborn have joined spirits to wring an issue of the elusive being of passage" (SP 162). After the bride has closed Elesef's eyes at the end of the play, Iyalolo tells her: "Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn" (SP 219).

If Olunde is the hero who enters to save the day, Elesef is clearly the antihero who has failed to fulfil his duty. The latter's failure has disrupted the existing order and placed the local community at the risk of incurring the wrath of the deceased. Like Ogun, Olunde achieves what those who have attempted to make the journey before him could not. Like Ogun who is moved by the gulf between the gods and humans and is thus compelled to bridge this interstitial space, Olunde cannot allow his father's cowardice to sever the link between the ancestral, the living and the unborn, and therefore musters the courage and will to take the latter's place. As Gibbs observes in Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka:

In the course of the play Elesef approaches 'the gulf of transition' and, though he stumbles, he suggests something of the passage in image and dance. In fact, he has certain qualities in common with Ogun, the first to cross the abyss and Soyinka's ideal tragic protagonist, but it is, of course, Olunde who proves himself the true devotee of the God of iron. (124)

Soyinka's treatment of Olunde's decision, by contrasting metropolitan rationality to native mysticism within the same person, conveys a strong statement in postcolonial discourse. Olunde has to confront the tension between ideas he grew up with in African
society and those he learned when in England. By having Olunde fulfil his Yoruba
calling, Soyinka asserts the legitimacy of a practice that is deemed irrational by colonial
standards. Wilson Harris contends that the presence of cross-cultural elements in
literature offers a new angle of interpretation of the power dynamics at play.

The paradox of cultural heterogeneity, or cross-cultural capacity, lies in the
evolutionary thrust it restores to orders of the imagination, the ceaseless dialogue
it inserts between hardened conventions and eclipsed or half-eclipsed otherness,
within an intuitive self that moves endlessly into flexible patterns, arcs or
bridges of community. (Cited in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989: 152)

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin explain in *The Empire Writes Back* that
Harris' reading of works by writers like Edgar Allan Poe, Jean Rhys, Patrick White,
Raja Rao and Derrick Walcott observes that "'certain persistent intuitive elements' in the
texts conspire to undermine the imperialism which governs the surface texture of
character and event" (152). They note that the "implications for literary modes and form
are profound, indicating a surface realism creatively fractured by the intrusive irrational,
by dream and madness" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989: 153). Thus, in Soyinka's
*Dance*, what appears to be the insane persistence of the African community in
completing the suicide ritual – and by a person who has gone through British education
– is a way of undermining European logic and order upheld by colonizers like Pilkings,
who sees African rituals as "mumbo-jumbo" and suicide as a crime under British law
(*SP* 164). Though the play ends with the tragic death of Olunde, it remains none the less
a bitter triumph for the indigenous community which is asserting its authority over its
own customs in its own land. Olunde's name is also aptly chosen. According to
Izevbaye, the name "Olunde" could have been derived from the word "Olundande"
which means "one who liberates" or the word "Olundanide" which means "he who rises
by himself" or "honour restored/arisen" (cited in Gibbs 1986: 125).
In conclusion, it is apparent that Soyinka denounces the kind of presumptuous or patronizing European interference displayed by Pilkings. However, any assumption that the playwright is entirely supportive of the suicide ritual is also moot. Isevbaye points out that such ritualistic, voluntary suicides, though a veritable practice in the past, now exist more as a mythical and symbolic reality in present-day Nigerian society. He also notes that by the end of the nineteenth century, almost all the chiefs who had the calling to accompany the deceased Alaafin had chosen not to die (cited in Gibbs 1986: 122). The portrayal of Elesin in Soyinka's play, then, should perhaps be seen as a tragedy of a man reluctant to surrender his personal preference to live, thus neglecting his duty to safeguard the community's wellbeing. At the same time, Soyinka also contrasts this reluctant patriarch who loses honor when he fails to fulfil his duty to his son, who despite having defied the custom that bars him from leaving the land, returns home intending to bury his father but ends up sacrificing himself to save the family's honor instead.

More importantly, *Death* explores the role of the chthonic realm in Yoruba metaphysics and its similarity to the ambivalent interstitial space between different and to a large extent, conflicting, cultural traditions. This gulf becomes a site of contestation between different beliefs and practices, as well as where a new cultural identity is being negotiated by the colonized subject. Olunde, who has been educated in England and paid close attention to British attitudes, but is also very committed to Yoruba beliefs, is characterized by a sense of in-betweeness. Like Ogun, he is dissatisfied with having to remain only in one realm. To Olunde, each cultural tradition is inadequate by itself. His new cultural identity is intercultural, a hybrid that embodies a material and conceptual manifestation of both African and European influences.

I would like to point out that this dilemma of cultural identity and commitment faced by the colonized subject is not a fictional concept but a reflection of colonial and
postcolonial reality. *Death* is based on historical events that took place in 1946 in the ancient Yoruba city of Oyo. The incident has also inspired other writers who referred to it as the basis of their plots. Duro Ladipo's *Oba Waja* is one example. The events concerned Olori Elesin, his son and the colonial District Officer, with the disastrous results depicted in the play, that is, the deaths of the two Africans wrought by the intervention of the white man (*SP* 144). In the "Author's Note", Soyinka explains that he has made changes to certain details, such as the sequence and characterization, "for minor reasons of dramaturgy" (*SP* 144). The playwright's dramatization of the historical incident – compared to a historical report – presents a more engaging picture of the various layers of interstitial space that could be found in the relationships in the play. The reenactment of the incident gives the reader a sense of the cultural and political conflicts that take place within indigenous African society, as well as between Africans and Europeans.