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Homo Sacer, Colonial Sovereignty, and Ontological Crisis in Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman

Ali Salami [1]✉ 0000-0001-5926-6282

1. Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.E-mail: salami.a@ut.ac.ir

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ABSTRACT

This essay revisits Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman through the prism of Giorgio Agamben's homo sacer, only to fracture the coherence of that figure within the colonial encounter. Elesin Oba's suspended subjectivity is not a metaphysical lapse or a tragic misreading between cultural grammars; it is a colonial deformation of ritual legibility, where the sacred and the abject no longer oppose but cohabit. The British interruption of Yoruba ritual suicide enacts more than cultural interference: it inaugurates a "state of exception" in which the suspension of indigenous law reasserts imperial sovereignty. Yet Soyinka's dramaturgy exceeds Agamben's juridico-political logic. Elesin is not merely abandoned by law but saturated by competing orders of ritual cosmology and colonial biopolitics that overdetermine his body. His death, once a consecrated passage, becomes a foreclosure of sacrifice itself as a recognizable form. In staging this impasse, Soyinka does not illustrate Agamben's paradigm; he displaces it. What emerges is a sacrificial subject fractured between ritual investiture and colonial apprehension, whose interrupted body is left neither sanctified nor redeemed, but suspended in the epistemic violence of imperial modernity.

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1. Introduction: Sacrifice, Sovereignty, and Colonial Disruption

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* does more than recount an individual collapse; it stages the unmaking of a political theology under imperial law. Elesin Oba's delay is not personal weakness. It marks a deeper breach: the horseman prepared for death yet denied it. He stands between the Yoruba order of cosmic succession, which requires his passage, and the colonial calculus of sovereignty, which arrests it. The body that should cross is confined, neither sanctified by ritual nor protected by law.

Before turning to Agamben or Mbembe, the argument grounds itself in Yoruba jurisprudence. *Àṣẹ* names the performative authority by which speech, rite, and office take effect; *òfin* denotes the normative law that binds persons and offices; *ìwà*, ethical character, conditions standing and remedy; *egúngún* protocols regulate ancestral passage, sanction, and communal accountability. Together they compose a legal-ritual order governing succession, atonement, and the right to die. The colonial "exception" that interrupts Elesin is not a neutral emergency but a counter-jurisdiction that suspends these obligations without instituting a replacement regime, rendering rites inoperative while leaving subjects exposed to sanction without remedy. Read through this Yoruba legal frame, the play treats Yoruba law as an analytic peer rather than illustrative culture: it tests Agamben's exception and Mbembe's necropolitics against a positive jurisprudence of passage, exposing what their paradigms occlude, namely suspended obligation as the operative scene of sovereign force.

Agamben's *homo sacer* clarifies this double negation: sacred yet killable, consecrated yet abandoned. Elesin is not a failed actor but a withheld presence, excluded from Yoruba continuity and from colonial legality alike. McNulty notes that European legal rationality converts him

into "colonial bare life," captured and expelled within biopolitical machinery (5).

In what follows, Yoruba jurisprudence serves as a co-equal analytic frame. In this tradition, *àṣẹ* names the efficacious authority that makes acts binding and worlds occur; *òfin* designates communal law that regulates the conditions of that efficacy; *ìwà* (ethical character) authorizes persons to bear *àṣẹ* under *òfin's* discipline. *Egúngún* protocols enact ancestral jurisdiction in public space, witnessing oaths, marking succession, adjudicating breach, and mediating the interval between the living and the dead. Read within this framework, Pilkings's arrest does not merely interrupt a ceremony; it sequesters *àṣẹ*, imposes an alien *òfin* that refuses *egúngún's* jurisdiction, and severs authority from *ìwà*. The scene thus exposes a conflict of legal ontologies rather than a clash of customs, a juridical neutralization of ritual law rather than a psychological failure. This Yoruba frame stands alongside the state of exception and reorients the claims about sovereignty, sacrifice, and legitimacy that follow.

What follows can be framed as three linked questions:

1. How does colonial sovereignty interrupt and disarticulate Yoruba ritual subjectivity while refusing to replace it, leaving a persisting interval rather than a void?
2. How far do *homo sacer* and the state of exception illuminate this interruption, and where do they fail before the opacity of ritual dislocation?
3. What tragic subject is constituted, or left suspended, by this foreclosure, and how does Soyinka's dramaturgy exceed or refigure Agamben's paradigm?

Against readings that reduce the play to cultural misrecognition or metaphysical allegory, Soyinka stages the juridical arrest of the sacred.

Pilkings does not misread the rite; he stops it, seizing Elesin at the threshold. Iyaloja names the rupture with severity: "the gods demanded only the old expired plantain but you cut down the sap-laden shoot to feed your pride" (Soyinka 76). Read with Agamben, the scene exposes the logic of sovereignty: Elesin becomes *homo sacer*, consecrated yet condemned. Denied the office's form of dying, he lingers in suspension; not only life but the legibility of sacrifice is stripped away.

Before the rupture, the horseman is not a mere functionary. He is the hinge of temporal passage, joining the living, the dead, and the unborn through sacrifice. "Transition," Soyinka writes, is no metaphor but a relay of being: "the universe of the Yoruba mind, the world of the living, the dead and the unborn" (Author's Note). With the colonial officer's intervention, what unfolds is the state of exception, a "no-man's-land between public law and political fact" (Agamben, *State of Exception* 2). Dragging Elesin from the square interrupts the grammar of transition. Sacrifice becomes detention. The exception hardens into rule, so that "the state of exception tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government," a threshold between democracy and absolutism (Agamben 3).

Critics have emphasized metaphysical tension and cross-cultural misrecognition (Jeyifo; Gikandi; Quayson; Gibbs). Gikandi, for instance, situates Soyinka within a decolonial rearticulation of identity, with drama as a "technology" of subjectivity (xvi). Yet this often misses the sharper wound: law's seizure of ritual. The play shows not failed translation but the capture of sacrifice by sovereignty.

The emphasis thus shifts. Elesin's delay marks the decree that decides who may die within sanctity and who must persist outside it. The decision is constitutive, not ancillary.

Agamben is not invoked to explain Yoruba metaphysics. Yoruba cosmology speaks with its own ontological grammar. His framework serves as a heuristic for naming the colonial interruption that suspends and renders inoperative those metaphysics without claiming to translate or subsume them.

2. Theoretical Framework: Ritual, Tragedy, and Political Power in Soyinka Studies

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* sits at the crossing of ritual poetics, postcolonial allegory, and tragic form. Scholarship has focused on three issues: the metaphysical necessity of sacrifice, the colonial state as misreader and disruptor, and whether tragedy can be translated into a postcolonial idiom. Sharp as these accounts are, they rarely meet juridico-political theory. Reading the drama as administrative power clarifies how sovereignty works through procedure. Pilkings's order, "I've instructed Amusa to arrest the man and lock him up… Amusa will bring him right here and lock him up in my study" (Soyinka 32) shrinks a sacrificial passage into a bureaucratic detour, converting cosmology into custody.

On this view, colonial sovereignty does not abolish indigenous law; it suspends and renders it inoperative. This essay takes up that juncture. With Agamben's state of exception and *homo sacer*, Elesin's fate appears not as personal weakness or mere cultural rupture but as ontopolitical abjection: the translation of a ritual subject into colonial bare life. The boast that "tonight is the night of my triumph" (Soyinka 8) curdles into carceral interruption. Following work that brings biopolitics to postcolonial analysis (Okonkwo), I place Elesin at the threshold of juridical intelligibility rather than at a simple cultural crossroads.

Within the ritual-metaphysical tradition, Biodun Jeyifo is decisive. He rejects anthropological pluralism and locates the play's weight in Yoruba cosmology, where death is transit and continuity (Jeyifo 112). Soyinka stages this ontology: Iyaloja foresees a joining of temporal orders, "the timelessness of the ancestor world and the unborn" wringing "an issue of the elusive being of passage" (Soyinka 21–22). Ato Quayson names the "mythopoetic structure of being" that grounds Soyinka's tragic imagination, where sacrifice functions as performative ontology, binding ethical, spiritual, and political registers (Quayson 87). Elesin's own diction renders the rite as seasonal necessity:

"It is buried like seed-yam in my mind;

This is the season of quick rains, the harvest

Is this moment due for gathering." (Soyinka 41)

Yet privileging the sacred can defer the sharper question: sovereignty as the power that decides what counts as ritual, who may enact it, and under what conditions. Pilkings learns of the rite and arrests the bridegroom by decree, not by negotiation. The issue is not misreading but mandate. Acting from his own Western value system, he unilaterally suspends indigenous law (Salami and Mohammadi 11). In the colonial exception, Elesin is neither ritually dead nor juridically alive, neither sanctified nor protected. He becomes a juridical object, confined in the very cell once used to hold enslaved people bound for North America, a stark figure of sacred duty reduced to criminal transgression. From this suspension, the present argument proceeds.

Resistance is essential: not the instrumentalization of Yoruba cosmology as backdrop for European theory, but attention to how Yoruba epistemologies of passage unsettle the premises of modern sovereignty. Between libation and decree, the play does not dress Agamben's exception

in local costume; it exposes the exception's temporal metaphysics as parochial. Soyinka fractures, rather than repeats, the paradigm. Yoruba ritual shows another grammar of obligation: time as recursive rather than linear, ethics that persist where law cannot, and a metaphysical debt that binds the living to the ancestral as the very infrastructure of legitimacy: "Coiled to the navel of the world is that endless cord that links us all to the great origin… [and] the trailing cord will bring me to the roots" (Soyinka 18). This cosmology refuses the linear catastrophe presumed by the exception.

A second strand of criticism reads colonial rupture not as metaphysical intrusion but as epistemic arrogance; administrative blindness turned into power. James Gibbs sees in Pilkings's act a discursive violence: Elesin's ritual death reclassified as crime, the sacred collapsed into an offense code (Gibbs 56). For Gibbs, the colonial state is a machine of misrecognition that works most decisively where it cannot comprehend. Simon Gikandi widens the frame, placing *Death and the King's Horseman* within colonial modernity, where imperial reason cannot register the ontological grammar of Yoruba sacrifice (Gikandi xvi). Colonialism, then, does not only halt ritual; it contorts it, forcing the sacred to submit to procedure and turning continuity into legality.

These accounts map the ideology of authority but stop short of its motor. The problem is not only misrecognition; it is suspension; the sovereign prerogative to halt one law and install another in the name of order. Soyinka stages this as history "epochalised": "ultimate political authority has changed residence," the district officer "intervenes and arrests Elesin before the sacrificial act" (Olaniyan 49–50). The impasse is not cultural confusion; the 'colonial factor' is so deeply implicated that it

cannot be separated from the crisis. What remains under-theorized is sovereignty's capacity to unmake: the ontological ground of ritual subjectivity is suspended. The interruption is not an epistemic error but an ontopolitical negation that expels the subject from his coordinates.

These readings clarify Soyinka's formal daring and his refusal of Eurocentric dramaturgy, yet they often leave the mechanism of rupture unnamed. Abiola Irele states it plainly: the play centers on "a precise, crucial moment of rupture in the African consciousness," moving from the immediacy of orality to "the tragic loss of the empowering function of the word" (Irele 17–18). On this view, Elesin's deferral is not a miscommunication or symbolic collapse; it is juridical intervention, the colonial exception that halts Yoruba law at the threshold, leaving the ritual body suspended.

Derek Wright's synthesis, as James Smith notes, shows how Soyinka yokes Yoruba ritual and festival forms to Western technique while insisting on freedom and justice. On this hybrid stage, the suspension of sovereignty can be shown in the very interstice where ritual and law collide (Smith 879).

Here Agamben's apparatus clarifies the structure. The state of exception (law suspended to "preserve" law) frames Elesin's paralysis. *Homo sacer* names the one who may be killed but not sacrificed, excluded from and captured within the legal order (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 82–87). Elesin stands in that interval: consecrated by Yoruba cosmology yet rendered politically void by colonial sovereignty, his death can be neither ritually fulfilled nor fully refused. The play names the effect with clarity: "You did not save my life District Officer. You destroyed it" (Soyinka 61).

This is not classical tragedy. There is no catharsis, no teleological closure. Soyinka stages a foreclosure of sovereignty: ritual reduced to bare

life, cosmology struck down under the mask of order. Elesin is denied the right to die; he is sentenced to remain. He calls it a theft of identity, and Iyaloja seals the verdict:

"The gods demanded only the old expired plantain but you cut down the sap-laden shoot to feed your pride" (Soyinka 76).

In Derrida's terms, this is archival domiciliation; house arrest as conservation by arrested passage (Derrida 2).

This reframing shifts the horizon. The play is not chiefly a drama of cultural misreading or metaphysical collision. It is a spectacle of sovereign capture. At its center is not Elesin's weakness but his juridical destitution: the conversion of a metaphysical agent into a political remainder. The drama exposes not only colonial interruption of ritual but the deeper logic that makes such interruption appear both inevitable and legitimate.

3. Agamben's Homo Sacer: Theory of Sovereignty and the State of Exception

The scaffold for this reading rests on Agamben's triad of sovereignty, bare life, and the state of exception, developed in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* and *State of Exception*. Agamben's claim is stark: political life (*bios*) is not opposed to bare life (*zoē*), it is its violent refinement. Sovereignty is the power to strip life of its political form, reducing it to a killable, unprotected remainder. The paradox appears in *homo sacer*: "It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide" (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 71–72).

Sovereignty is defined not by routine administration but by suspension, by declaring the exception that both founds and destabilizes law. The sovereign is "at the same time outside and inside the juridical order," since he alone "has the legal power to suspend the validity of the law"

(Agamben, *State of Exception* 15). Law shows its force at the limit, where it dissolves into sheer power: the sovereign "creates and guarantees the situation" and holds "the monopoly to decide" (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 16–17). From this vantage, "only bare life is authentically political" (106). Hence the paradigm of *homo sacer*: "unsacrificeable, yet he may nevertheless be killed by anyone" (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 114).

Elesin comes to dwell at this threshold between *bios* and *zoē*, legality and its suspension. In Yoruba cosmology, the horseman's death is passage, the act binding living, dead, and unborn. With colonial intrusion, the rite is not misread; it is suspended by decree. The law that sanctified his death is arrested. Imperial law recasts him as a subject of the state, forbidden to die ritually yet denied the full protections of life. He is neither executed nor allowed to consummate his office. A life once charged with metaphysical consequence is turned into vacancy.

Elesin is thus not the tragic hero whose death yields recognition or redemption. He figures *homo sacer*: consecrated yet unsacrificed, alive yet stripped of ritual legibility. Sovereignty realizes itself most fully by withholding law under the pretext of preserving it. The subject of this withholding is not the citizen but the residue of the human, bare life reduced to a biopolitical remainder.

3.1. Colonialism and Biopolitics

Agamben's account of sovereign abandonment gains traction when set beside Foucault's biopolitics and Mbembe's necropolitics. Foucault shifts focus to the administration of vitality, defining modern power as that which "consists in making live and letting die" (*Society Must Be Defended* 247). Mbembe extends this to the colony as "a place and a time of half-death … [where] life and death are so entangled" (*Necropolitics* 196), a zone where "Life there is worth nothing" (185). In such spaces,

sovereignty does not cultivate; it abandons. Power turns necropolitical: populations are exposed to exterminability, abandonment, and foreclosure.

Mbembe critiques Agamben's Eurocentric scaffolding, the Roman-juridical archive, Christian theodicy, European exceptionalism. Yet he radicalizes the core insight. The colony is not an aberration of modern politics but its originary scene, where exception is normalized and law dissolves into war. In the postcolony, "war, and not only war, is accompanied by the rise of a culture of immunity," and "death is administered publicly" (*Necropolitics* 82). Such wars "rearrang[e] the ways territory and people are administered," eventually "incapacitat[ing] whole sections of the population politically" (87). As regulation collapses, "All it has left is control of the forces of coercion" (Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* 75).

Within this frame, Elesin's suspension is not tragic error; it is necropolitical governance. Agamben names the mechanism: "The exception does not subtract itself from the rule; rather, the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception" (*State of Exception* 18–19). Through the exception, the sovereign "creates and guarantees the situation" and preserves "the monopoly to decide" (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 17).

At the threshold of passage, Elesin claims intimate knowledge of the sacred route:

"The seven-way crossroads confuses

Only the stranger. The Horseman of the King

Was born in the recesses of the house". (Soyinka 42)

Colonial rule manufactures that "stranger," recoding the ritual knower as an ontological outsider and rendering the path unintelligible. In Mbembe's idiom, empire does not contest the law of passage; it abandons

it in place, leaving juridical husks, forms persisting as empty containers. This aligns with Hansen and Stepputat, who detach sovereignty from the state and track it across camps, checkpoints, occupied zones, and the colonial outpost (295). These are zones of indistinction, where rule and force blur. Here, at Agamben's threshold of bare life, sovereignty governs by interruption.

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, the officer does not replace Yoruba law with imperial law; he withholds. His is a sovereign non-act: a pause that derails time, an omission that terminates ritual without completing it. No grand decree, only delay. This is regulation by negation, and Elesin bears its weight. His readiness to enact the passage dissolves before imperial temporality. He is not overruled but displaced. The body persists; its function is annulled. He does not ascend into ancestry; he lingers as after-image, his sovereignty downgraded to archival residue. He names the strategy of withholding:

"You are waiting for dawn white man. I hear you saying to yourself: only so many hours until dawn and then the danger is over. All I must do is keep him alive tonight". (Soyinka 61)

Invoking Agamben in postcolonial contexts is hazardous. Critics such as Hamid Dabashi warn against a Euro-Christian genealogy that, when globalized, risks repeating the epistemic violence it critiques. Reading Elesin through *homo sacer* is therefore heuristic, not assimilative. He inhabits the zone where death loses ritual meaning and life loses political protection, not metaphysical rupture but imperial capture. Even the figure of his bride, symbol of continuity, is seized by colonial time: "Let it take root in the earth of my choice," he pleads, yet the marriage is permitted while the death is arrested (Soyinka 21).

Mbembe's move is decisive. He does not enthrone Agamben; he provincializes him, re-suturing the juridico-political to the colonial wound. *Homo sacer* becomes a recurrent figure within racial sovereignty's global architecture. The colony is "the site where sovereignty consists fundamentally in the exercise of a power outside the law (*ab legibus solutus*) and where 'peace' is more likely to take on the face of a 'war without end'" (*Necropolitics* 23). In this light, Elesin's suspension is not misrecognition but necropolitical practice: ritual sovereignty voided by administrative decree. As the Praise-Singer warns:

"The gourd you bear is not for shirking.

The gourd is not for setting down.

At the first crossroad or wayside grove.

Only one river may know its contents". (Soyinka 17)

This essay therefore resists treating Elesin as *homo sacer* in a strictly Roman key. He stands within a colonial necropolitics that imitates the very structures Agamben isolates: sovereign suspension of law, sacred duty transfigured as crime, ritual death converted into bare life politicized as residue. The aim is accuracy, not theoretical purity. Elesin's collapse is juridico-political, inscribed by empire. What perishes is not the man alone but the ontological coherence of a sacrificial order: "It is he who must, with one / Great gesture overtake the world" (Soyinka 17), and it is precisely this gesture that empire forecloses.

4. Colonial Law and Ritual Suspension: The State of Exception in Death and the King's Horseman

At the fulcrum of *Death and the King's Horseman* is not a vague cultural clash but a conflict of laws: Yoruba ritual sovereignty versus British bureaucratic rationality. In Acts IV–V this crystallizes as a

sovereign act. The officer interrupts not the rite but the law that consecrates it; as Elesin notes,

"You are waiting for dawn white man. I hear you saying to yourself: only so many hours until dawn and then the danger is over. All I must do is keep him alive tonight. You don't quite understand it all but you know that tonight is when what ought to be must be brought about." (Soyinka 62)

What follows is not adjudication but suspension namely Agamben's state of exception where law halts, ritual sovereignty is annulled, and the sacred subject is left exposed.

The rupture begins in Act IV with Simon Pilkings's fiat. Told of Elesin's passage, he sees administrative peril: "No-o. I'll have the man arrested. Everyone remotely involved" (Soyinka 25). The words are an act. He does not negotiate with the sacred; he evacuates it. The passage is dissolved in the idiom of threat and disorder. The sacred is not debated; it is refused.

Elesin's claim, "My rein is loosened. I am master of my Fate" (Soyinka 14), is emptied by a colonial power that withholds the ritual end. Withholding fractures time. The continuum that bound death to transition collapses into stasis: neither the living nor the ancestral, only the arrested afterimage of an unacknowledged ceremony.

This is the violence Agamben isolates: sovereignty enacted through suspension. The officer does not replace Yoruba cosmology with imperial statute; he hollows it. Sovereignty works by "the suspension of the law in the name of preserving it" (Agamben, *State of Exception* 2). Iyaloja names the cost: not only ritual form but metaphysical shelter is destroyed:

"The living must eat and drink. When the moment comes, don't turn the food to rodents' droppings in their mouth". (Soyinka 22)

In this void, Elesin is forsaken, not condemned; the prison cell translates administrative suspension into ontological foreclosure: "Give me back the name you have taken away from me, you ghost from the land of the nameless!" (Soyinka 59). Even his sensorium records the break: "I have freed myself of earth and now / It's getting dark. Strange voices guide my feet" (Soyinka 42). What remains is de-animation: "The world is not a constant honey-pot" (Soyinka 14).

This is juridical grief, not classical tragedy. Soyinka anatomizes a power that suspends without supplanting, seizes life while rendering it unritualizable. As Elesin names the interruption, "You may have stopped me in my duty but I know now that I did give birth to a son" (Soyinka 68).

4.1. Indigenous Law vs. Colonial Law

The exception's bureaucratic erasure of metaphysical obligation is stark in the clash between Yoruba jurisprudence and colonial governance. In Yoruba law, voiced by the Praise-Singer and Iyaloja, Elesin's death is compulsory. "Our world was never wrenched from its true course" (Soyinka 10) functions as a juridical axiom of continuity. Death is constitutional, sustaining the circulation of unborn, living, and ancestral dead. Joseph states it in administrative terms: "It is native law and custom. The King die last month. Tonight is his burial" (Soyinka 28).

Colonial law does not dispute this order; it voids it. Pilkings need not argue; his regime renders the sacred inoperative. Amusa's blunt relay exposes the mechanism: "The government say dat kin' ting must stop" (Soyinka 36). Iyaloja names the cost of such "protection": "To prevent one death you will actually make other deaths? … Ah, great is the wisdom of the white race" (Soyinka 73). What follows is not spectacle but sequestration, Elesin's ontological erasure. When the circuit is re-routed,

the polity registers the breach without ambiguity: "Your heir has taken the burden on himself" (Soyinka 75). This is not misrecognition; it is the afterlife of a law suspended in place.

Elesin's undoing is liminality. He is made ontologically incoherent. Soyinka shows this by fracture rather than exposition, through broken rhythms and faltering self-accounting. In the cell he concedes, "Enough, Iyaloja, enough. . . . My shame is heavy enough" (Soyinka 68), then gropes for coherence: "I need neither your pity nor the pity of the world. I need understanding. Even I need to understand" (Soyinka 68). These are not the words of a man who has merely failed but of a being stripped of ritual legibility.

As the colonial interruption severs the circuit of passage, Elesin testifies to a self unmade:

"I made to utter my spells anew but my tongue merely rattled in my mouth. . . . [It] sapped my powers and turned me into an infant in the hands of unnamable strangers". (Soyinka 68)

What emerges is not moral collapse but ontological disqualification, the sacrificial subject reduced to incoherence by sovereign suspension.

Agamben's *homo sacer* is sacred yet unprotected, included only through exclusion, killable yet unsacrificeable. Soyinka stages a cognate paradox. Elesin is not expelled but rendered cosmologically irrelevant, marked as sacred yet stripped of function. His final act reads not as resistance but as remainder, a suspended closure that inscribes the exception as sovereign non-action. The sacred persists, but as residue.

4.2. Comparative Note: Soyinka's Ritual vs. Agamben's Paradigm

Soyinka's sacred is not Agamben's. For Agamben, the sacred is a juridical residue, the trace of abandonment. For Soyinka, it is vital and generative, the living grammar of continuity. Ritual enacts cohesion; death

is civic fulfillment: "There is only one world to the spirit of our race. If that world leaves its course and smashes on boulders of the great void, whose world will give us shelter?" (Soyinka 10). Mekunda marks the ontological distinction: Yoruba death is ritual passage, not spectral survival (54).

Agamben's value is in naming what halts this metaphysics. His theory does not chart Yoruba ontology; it exposes its interruption. In colonial Oyo, sacred law is not abolished but suspended. Ritual fails not by its own logic but by sovereign pause. Pilkings voices the administrative deflection: "Probably the effect of those bloody drums. Do you hear how they go on and on? […] I don't think I've heard this particular sound before. Something unsettling about it" (Soyinka 27). Agamben supplies the grammar of rupture: sovereignty suspends meaning without disputing it (*State of Exception* 2).

Their convergence is not metaphysical accord but shared exposure. Soyinka stages the consequence; Agamben names the mechanism. The play unfolds in Elesin's suspended body, no longer a vessel of transition but a site inscribed by dual sovereignties. "It is when the alien hand pollutes the source of will, when a stranger force of violence shatters the mind's calm resolution" (Soyinka 69) registers ontological collapse. As Topper observes, Soyinka figures colonialism as a theological seizure that diverts indigenous time by imperial decree (54). Death becomes administration. Passage becomes possession. The metaphysical is rerouted through the colonial exception.

5. Sacrificial Subjectivity and the Ontological Foreclosure of Elesin

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* does not simply mourn metaphysical disarray; it stages the ontological erosion of a

sacrificial subject suspended between juridical mandate and colonial interruption. Elesin does not symbolize; he enacts. His body is consecrated office, juridical medium, the hinge that seals passage and bears the king's spirit into ancestral permanence. In Yoruba cosmology this is not metaphor but law, a metaphysical legality: "Life is honour. It ends when honour ends" (Soyinka 15).

Colonial power does not forbid the act; it voids its legality while leaving the form intact. Elesin persists neither as martyr nor traitor but as residue, a metaphysical remainder figured as *homo sacer*: sacralized yet abject, consecrated yet denied consummation. He becomes the trace of a law that no longer commands yet continues to haunt:

"The world is set adrift and its inhabitants are lost. Around them, there is nothing but emptiness". (Soyinka 63)

Iyaloja warns against this unmooring: "Don't set this world adrift in your own time; would you rather it was my hand whose sacrilege wrenched it loose?" (Soyinka 21).

As Mohammadi and Salami argue, the interruption is more than cultural collision; it reveals a political unconscious, an "unsaid" inscribed within the play's metaphysical fabric (119–20). Soyinka's dramaturgy resists allegory yet is haunted by postcolonial afterlives. Collapse persists, recursive and unresolved, as law and life fall out of alignment and the sacred decays.

Elesin's tragedy is not moral lapse or metaphysical confusion but as Lisi names it, a descent from cosmology into history. The fall is insidious: hesitation hardens into event; a single breath ruptures centuries. The axis of sacred time fractures. The passage closes by interruption, not violence. No surrogate completes it. He remains suspended: consecrated yet unreceived, summoned yet uninitiated. The drums continue, but no longer

address him. "I cannot tell where is that gateway through which I must pass" (Soyinka 41).

This is colonial power in altered form: not execution but postponement; not domination but suspension. Death is stripped of ceremony and endures as inscription, the body withheld from consummation and entered into the imperial ledger as remainder. Presence contracts into residue. Denied completion, sacrifice reverses course and writes itself into absence.

5.1. Elesin as *Homo Sacer*

Elesin is figured not as character but as conduit, revered yet bound, sovereign in gesture yet shackled in fate. His subjectivity is ritualized, scripted as the hinge through which continuity must pass. He concedes that all turns on "that moment for which my whole life has been spent in blessings" (Soyinka 67). The Praise-Singer invokes the "Endless cord that links us all / To the great origin" (Soyinka 23), making his body a splice in a transgenerational circuit rather than a sovereign self. This is the determinism of office, not temperament: a life conscripted into sacred continuity, where failure is a systemic derailment of the conduit.

Agamben's *homo sacer* functions here as lens. "Included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion" (*Homo Sacer* 8), the figure inhabits the meeting of sacrality and abandonment. So does Elesin once Yoruba law is suspended. Still marked, yet unprotected; sacred, yet unclaimed. "I go to keep my friend and master company" (Soyinka 11), he vows, but the passage never begins. He is not denied subjectivity; he is made to endure its collapse.

The prison literalizes this suspension. "A wide iron-barred gate stretches almost the whole width of the cell in which Elesin is imprisoned" (Soyinka 60). In this topology of pause, Iyaloja names the emptied subject:

"Oh you emptied bark that the world once saluted for a pith-laden being" (Soyinka 69–70). Not lament but wreckage: the conduit hollowed while form persists.

Elesin is no longer dying; he is forbidden to die correctly, and so he cannot live. The rite is not disproved but reversed, its teleology arrested. Iyaloja's verdict seals it: "Now look at the spectacle of your life. I grieve for you" (Soyinka 70). Symbolic deferral hardens into ontological foreclosure, the ritual agent reduced to bare presence, suspended between necessity and negation.

5.2. Political Ontology: Ritualized and Foreclosed Subjectivity

Elesin's body is the stage on which colonial sovereignty performs its most insidious act: interruption. His being is defined not by presence but by arrest. Through mythic cadence and fractured ritual, Soyinka renders what Agamben calls the logic of abandonment, a power that suspends, erases, and leaves only the trace of its intrusion (*State of Exception* 1–4). This is bare life, not Foucault's biopolitical subject but one exposed at the threshold, held open by the impossibility of both life and death: "Subjected to the sovereign right of death," yet forbidden to complete it (*Society Must Be Defended* 247).

Colonialism does not misread the rite; it fabricates ontological incoherence. In Yoruba thought, death is transition, not terminus. To halt the passage is to dismantle a world. Elesin is not a failed man; he is a man held in sovereign pause, his liminality structural. As Weyenberg notes, Soyinka stages metaphysical sabotage: empire disables ritual, empties it, then returns it as spectacle (214). Soyinka makes the logic of passage explicit, "Our spirits shall fall in step along the great passage" (Soyinka 41) so that colonial interruption appears as violent un-stepping, the severing of the path itself.

His suicide does not restore order. The circle no longer closes. It is neither sacrifice nor martyrdom, since both require recognition, a listening cosmos now denied. The act occurs but is unreceived. He names it as rupture and severance, not transcendence. His confession registers disjunction: the joy he was charged to complete is undone, and his dishonor will persist after the body is removed.

Here death is not culmination but residue. The gesture does not redeem; it implodes. Once the framework that sealed intention to effect is withdrawn, ritual falls into debris. What lingers is unraveling: a sacred life disarticulated in a world that no longer answers, echoes, or turns its face toward the dying.

5.3. Broader Implications: African Tragedy and the Politics of Subjectivity

To read Elesin as *homo sacer* is to recast *Death and the King's Horseman* as a tragedy of political ontology. Not Greek necessity, not Shakespearean flaw, but suspension. His sacred office is made unintelligible; his death, unritualizable: "The world was mine… but the twilight hour brings bats and rodents" (Soyinka 15). The rafters fall not from personal failure but from a ruined architecture.

Soyinka's play is less intercultural encounter than ontological critique. The tragedy is interruption. Elesin's body becomes the site where sacred obligation meets sovereign delay. "I am master of my Fate" (Soyinka 10), yet power seizes the reins by halting the ritual continuum itself. The breakdown is structural, threatening coherence across living, dead, and unborn. As Bigot argues, the failed rite is "a dissident tool" that exposes how colonial intrusion shatters the metaphysical grounds of Yoruba continuity (Bigot 2024).

This reframes African tragedy. Sovereignty is not backdrop but the mechanism of suspension. Gikandi names it the "trauma of the untranslatable," where ritual collides with administrative reason and breath is trapped (138). Elesin is not merely unfulfilled; he is rendered unfulfillable: "The world I know is the bounty / Of hives after bees have swarmed" (Soyinka 17). The hum persists; the bees are gone.

Agamben does not explain Yoruba cosmology; he names its seizure. Read beside Soyinka's poetics, his theory points beyond the stale tradition–modernity binary. The play becomes a critique of sovereignty's dramaturgy: the sacred not abolished but withheld, ritual not denied but suspended, its afterlife conscripted into imperial administration, where sacred time persists only as interruption.

6. Rewriting the Stakes: From Cross-Cultural Misreading to Political Metaphysics

The dominant reading of *Death and the King's Horseman* locates tragedy in failed cultural translation: incommensurate worlds, ritual misread under colonial incomprehension. James Gibbs and Ato Quayson cast Elesin's collapse as epistemological fracture; the officer cannot grasp the ontological weight of ritual death, and that failure triggers catastrophe. The play stages this gap when Olunde rebukes Jane Pilkings: "You have no respect for what you do not understand" (Soyinka 50).

This essay departs from that frame. I read the play through political metaphysics. The rupture is ontological, not cultural; not miscommunication but sovereign veto. Colonial power does not fail to understand Yoruba ritual; it renders it inoperative, arresting the cosmological-juridical order that made the rite binding. Elesin's failure is structural, not semantic: the meaning remains, the world that gave it force is suspended.

When the crisis reaches Pilkings, he does not engage cosmology; he processes a memo: "the Elesin Oba, is to commit death tonight as a result of native custom. Because this is criminal offence I await further instruction at charge office" (Soyinka 25). He translates obligation into penal code: "Obviously he means murder" (Soyinka 25–26). In Agamben's terms, sovereignty acts by interruption, "the suspension of the law in the name of preserving it" (*State of Exception* 2), leaving the sacred annulled, its forms intact but emptied.

This shift reframes tragic subjectivity. The sacred body is not a casualty of misunderstanding but an artifact of exposure, made disposable by design. Where Quayson activates African metaphysics within modern crisis, and Gibbs stresses ethical misalignment, this reading turns to imperial suspension: the power not only to misread but to render unreadable. The drama does not stage a failure to comprehend; it stages the juridical nullification of the sacred, the bureaucratic stripping of ritual's ontological ground.

Iyaloja delivers the verdict of foreclosure: "He is gone at last into the passage but oh, how late it all is. His son will feast on the meat and throw him bones" (Soyinka 75), a rite delayed into desecration. When Pilkings would tidy the scene, she resists the reduction of the sacred to waste: "However sunk he was in debt he is no pauper's carrion abandoned on the road" (Soyinka 76). What collapses is not one man or a cultural code but the very possibility of sacred enactment under sovereign pause, the world in which meaning once held force, suspended in place.

6.1. Relevance to Contemporary Political Theory

This reconceptualization reaches beyond Soyinka's stage to unsettle how sovereignty, ritual, and subjectivity are theorized across colonial and

postcolonial terrains. At stake is not only the meaning of ritual but the ontological infrastructure that makes ritual legible, executable, and binding. Elesin's aborted passage figures what Agamben calls "inclusive exclusion," the logic by which political life is constituted through abandonment (*Homo Sacer* 8). The colonial state does not install a rival metaphysics; it suspends the existing one, leaving Yoruba law inoperative. Sovereignty appears as withholding, a performed suspension that neutralizes a cosmology.

This suspension resonates with Mbembe's necropolitics, where colonial sovereignty ceases to govern and instead abandons. The colony becomes the paradigm of the state of exception, not the absence of law but its persistence as negation. Life is not extinguished but exposed, perpetually vulnerable and killable without recognition (*Necropolitics* 23). In this frame, Elesin's fate is not symbolic disruption but a sovereign structure that strips African subjectivity of ritual coherence, juridical standing, and cosmological depth. He is not simply confined; he is ontologically disarticulated.

Hansen and Stepputat's "sovereignty as practice" sharpens the analysis. Sovereignty is not stable authority but episodic acts. Pilkings's detention of Elesin exemplifies this: neither law nor justice, but a sovereign maneuver performed through interruption. Colonial power operates less by continuous rule than by punctual suspension. *Death and the King's Horseman* thus reads as a case study in the microphysics of empire, where authority is staged by fracture rather than governance.

Reframing the play as political metaphysics redirects the discourse of postcolonial tragedy. These works do not merely stage cultural misalignment; they disclose the infrastructural violence that constitutes imperial power. The crisis is not failed comprehension but the juridico-

political logic that renders life sacred, exposed, and ungrievable. In this register, African ritual is not displaced by modernity but actively unmade by empire. As Olakunle George observes, Soyinka's dramaturgy theorizes historical being, offering not only aesthetic form but a conceptual map of how empire dismantles the metaphysical scaffolding of communal life (72). What endures is structured absence, sovereign violence articulated in the idiom of ritual collapse.

7. Conclusion: Towards a Political Ontology of Postcolonial Ritual

This essay has attempted a radical reconceptualization of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* by shifting the frame from epistemological misrecognition to ontological interruption. Against readings that interpret the colonial encounter as failed translation, figured by critics such as James Gibbs and Ato Quayson, this argument reorients the tragic center through Agamben's figures of *homo sacer* and the state of exception. Elesin emerges not as a man misread but as a subject foreclosed: consecrated by Yoruba law yet rendered disposable through the sovereign suspension of the very cosmology that once secured his being.

In this frame, Elesin's collapse is neither lapse nor metaphysical error; it is biopolitical catastrophe. His subjectivity, once ritually inscribed, is unraveled not by misrecognition but by imperial performance, the colonial power to interrupt without supplanting and to neutralize law by rendering it inoperative. What unfolds is no tragedy in the classical mode but a drama of sovereign violence, a political-theological rupture in which the sacrificial body is stripped of legibility, sanctity, and futurity.

This repositioning opens a wider field. The sacrificial subject as *homo sacer* may be traced across a transnational postcolonial canon, wherever

ritual subjectivity collides with the state's interruptive force. The figure reappears in the revolutionary martyrs of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, in the gendered unraveling of *Anowa*, in the ideological hauntings of *Morountodun*. Beyond Africa, the same grammar illuminates the juridical unmaking of the disappeared, the ungrievable, and the unsanctified across the Caribbean, South Asia, and Latin America.

Ultimately, this reading presses the ethical and theoretical urgency of confronting sacrificial subjectivity in the postcolonial present. As Achille Mbembe says, colonial sovereignty does not merely dominate; it reconfigures the very conditions under which life becomes exposed, unprotected, and unwitnessed (*Necropolitics* 23). Elesin's halted passage is not only metaphysical rupture but performative event, where death is emptied of meaning and life hollowed of substance. To read this now is to reckon with the residues of empire as they persist not only in governance but in the ontologies of the human. That reckoning is not optional; it is imperative.

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