

Navigating the Threshold: Liminality and Failed Negotiation in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and *The Strong Breed*

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Abstract: This paper explores the intricate relationship between liminality and negotiation as depicted in Wole Soyinka's seminal plays, *Death and the King's Horseman* and *The Strong Breed*. Drawing primarily on Victor Turner's expanded theory of liminality emphasising "anti-structure" and the potential for transformation, and a broad interpretation of negotiation encompassing cultural, identity, and existential dimensions, this study argues that Soyinka's characters and communities are consistently thrust into profound "in-between" states, compelling them to engage in diverse processes of negotiation. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, the paper analyses Elesin's tragic failure to navigate his ritualistic liminality, exacerbated by the disruptive negotiations imposed by colonial intervention. It examines how this failure, driven by both personal desire and external interference, plunges the community into a dislocated state, forcing desperate attempts at cultural and spiritual reconciliation. Conversely, *The Strong Breed* is investigated for its portrayal of inherited liminality through the figure of the "carrier," particularly Eman, who grapples with an internal negotiation between self-preservation and sacrificial duty. This play highlights the community's coercive "negotiation" of its spiritual well-being through ritualistic violence. Ultimately, this analysis reveals how Soyinka utilises liminality not merely as a transitional phase, but as a crucible where conflicting worldviews collide, identities are fractured, and the very fabric of social order is renegotiated. The paper concludes that the tragic outcomes in both plays stem from fundamental failures or impossibilities of genuine negotiation

within these fraught liminal spaces, offering critical insights into the enduring struggles of tradition, modernity, and the quest for communal and individual meaning.

Keywords: Navigating, Threshold, Liminality, Negotiation, Passage, Transition

Introduction

Human experience is invariably marked by transitions, moments where the familiar recedes and the contours of a new reality are yet to crystallise. These "in-between" states, often fraught with ambiguity and uncertainty, compel individuals and communities to navigate complex pathways that determine their very survival and identity. The Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, a towering figure in African literature, masterfully dramatises these perilous thresholds within his plays. Renowned for his piercing critiques of colonialism and post-colonial governance, Soyinka consistently explores the fraught intersections of inherited traditions and modern exigencies, the tension between individual destiny and communal imperative, and the profound power of ritual in shaping human experience.

Wole Soyinka's dramatic oeuvre articulates a unique entanglement of ritual, cosmology, and tragic fate. Particularly in *Death and the King's Horseman* (Soyinka, 1975) and *The Strong Breed* (Soyinka, 1973), Soyinka stages the threshold figures of Elesin and Eman as embodiments of fractured negotiation—between self and community, tradition and colonial modernity, cosmic duty and personal desire. This extended critical analysis argues that these plays enact a ritual failure, not simply by colonial disruption, but by internal collapse and structural violence where negotiation collapses across identity, symbolism, and power.

Drawing on Victor Turner's theory of liminality (Turner, 1969), Soyinka's own metaphysical dramaturgy (Soyinka, 1976; Soyinka, 1988), and recent scholarship (Abakporo, 2022; Bigot, 2024; Garuba, 2022; Onuoha & Uwah, 2023; Salami, 2023), this essay interrogates how failed negotiation is the tragic core in Soyinka's vision. Unlike earlier readings that emphasise cultural confrontation or heroic sacrifice, this argument emphasises ontological impasse—liminality without passage, negotiation without resolution.



Theoretical Framework: Liminality

The concept of liminality, derived from the Latin *limen* meaning "threshold", provides a crucial lens through which to analyse moments of transition and transformation in human experience. While first systematically explored by the French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep in his seminal work *The Rites of Passage* (1909), it was the British anthropologist Victor Turner who significantly expanded and deepened the theoretical understanding of liminality, transforming it into a powerful analytical tool for studying social and cultural dynamics beyond mere ritual transitions.

Van Gennep's tripartite model of rites of passage – comprising separation, *limen* (threshold or transition), and reaggregation – laid the groundwork by identifying the universal structural pattern of ceremonial transitions (Van Gennep, 1960, pp. 18–21). However, Turner, drawing extensively from his fieldwork among the Ndembu of Zambia, honed in on the liminal phase itself as a distinct and highly potent period. For Turner, this "betwixt and between" state is characterised by ambiguity and paradox, where individuals are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner, 1967, p. 95). Stripped of their former status and not yet invested with a new one, liminal personae are often anonymous, humble, and subject to the authority of ritual elders, existing outside the normal social structure.

A central tenet of Turner's liminal theory is the emergence of "anti-structure" within the liminal phase. Unlike established social structure, which is differentiated and hierarchical, anti-structure represents a temporary dissolution of these distinctions. In this state, social hierarchies may be inverted, roles may be blurred, and conventional norms may be suspended (Turner, 1969, p. 102). This chaotic or unstructured environment, however, is not merely negative; it is pregnant with possibility. It becomes a space where the fundamental values and axioms of a culture can be scrutinised, re-evaluated, and potentially re-formed. The suspension of normal limits allows for a heightened awareness of shared humanity and a deeper understanding of the collective (Turner, 1969, p. 105).



Furthermore, Turner introduced the concept of "communitas", which often arises in the liminal phase. Communitas refers to an intense bond of solidarity and shared experience among those undergoing the same liminal process. It is a direct, spontaneous, and egalitarian relationship, contrasting sharply with the structured, hierarchical relationships of everyday life (Turner, 1969, p. 132). This feeling of collective unity, born from shared vulnerability and the temporary effacement of social distinctions, is a powerful, often regenerative, force within the liminal period. However, Turner also acknowledged that liminality is a state of great intensity that cannot be sustained indefinitely; it must eventually resolve into a new structure, or risk devolving into prolonged chaos or pathology (Turner, 1967, p. 100).

While Turner primarily applied liminality to ritual contexts in small-scale societies, he later introduced the concept of the "liminoid" to describe similar "in-between" phenomena in complex, industrialised societies, often found in leisure activities, arts, and protest movements (Turner, 1982, pp. 20–21). However, for the purposes of analysing Wole Soyinka's plays, the core principles of ritual liminality – its ambiguity, anti-structure, potential for communitas, and inherent transformative power (or lack thereof) – remain highly pertinent. Soyinka's characters and communities frequently find themselves in such threshold situations, grappling with the dissolution of old orders and the uncertain, often perilous, emergence of new realities. It is in these liminal crucibles that the necessity and the tragic failures of negotiation become most apparent. Contemporary scholarship extends the application of liminality beyond traditional anthropology. Horvath, Thomassen, and Wydra (2015) argue that liminality serves as a tool to understand political and social transformations, especially when "seemingly irrational conditions of liminality have logics of their own" (p. 1). This broader view aligns with the complexities Soyinka presents. Thomassen (2015) further emphasises that liminality "should be considered a master concept in the wider social and political sciences" due to its universality in human experience and its capacity to illuminate how people deal with change (p. 39). He notes that liminality, in social and political life, has become a pervasive structure, often cementing modernity's problems rather than overcoming them (Thomassen, 2015, p. 40). Szokolczai (2015) elaborates on this, connecting liminality to philosophical concepts of "limit" and "unlimited,"



suggesting that modern thought, particularly after Kant, often neglects the transformative potential of being "at the limit" (p. 11). This critical perspective reinforces how deeply embedded the concept of liminality is in understanding moments of profound societal and individual change. Other scholars also apply liminality to varied contexts, such as the ambiguous nature of housing definitions (Mullins & Whitehead, 2024), which further demonstrates the concept's versatility across disciplines. Rhein (2024) explores liminality in niche television programming, illustrating how transitional spaces and characters are used to engage audiences in new ways. Such applications extend beyond simple categorisation to evaluating the effectiveness of change processes, for instance, in organisational settings, where liminality can expose conflicts and resistance (Thomassen et al., 2021). Turner's conception of liminality—as a transformative threshold offering *communitas*—is critically challenged by Soyinka's staging: Elesin does not emerge renewed but fails to transition. Turner recognised that liminal figures may return changed only if the ritual is enacted fully; if disrupted, transformation is aborted (Turner, 1967, p. 97). Yet Soyinka takes ritual further, situating it cosmically: failure threatens the community's metaphysical order, not just social cohesion. This shift aligns Soyinka more closely with contemporary theorists like Szakolczai (2015) and Horvath, Thomassen and Wydra (2021), who argue that modern liminal spaces often ossify into permanent crises—ritual becomes liminoid, passage is denied, and meaning collapses. Soyinka dramatizes such crisis: the failure of Elesin's dance or Eman's sacrificial run signals not rebirth but rupture.

Theoretical Framework: Negotiation

While commonly associated with formal bargaining processes aimed at reaching a consensus, the concept of negotiation in the context of literary and cultural analysis extends far beyond this narrow definition. For this study, negotiation is understood as a dynamic and diverse process through which individuals, groups, or even entire cultural systems attempt to manage conflicting values, reconcile opposing worldviews, forge new identities, and ultimately determine their expediency amidst profound change. This can involve active dialogue, but also more implicit forms of contestation, adaptation, resistance, or even coercion. In situations marked by liminality, where established structures and certainties are suspended, the need for



negotiation becomes paramount. When old rules dissolve and new ones have yet to form, every interaction becomes a potential site for the contestation and redefinition of power, meaning, and identity. This broad understanding allows for the analysis of various layers of negotiation within Soyinka's plays.

Cultural Negotiation: This refers to the complex processes that unfold when distinct cultural systems, like the indigenous Yoruba traditions and the imposed British colonial administration, confront each other. This is rarely a symmetrical process; it involves power imbalances, the imposition of one worldview over another, resistance, and sometimes, a forced syncretism or tragic misunderstanding. As postcolonial theorists like Homi K. Bhabha argue, such encounters create "third spaces" where meanings are contested and hybrid identities emerge, often through painful processes of cultural translation and reinterpretation (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). Montle (2021) reinforces this, arguing that colonialism imposed European values upon African natives, leading to a profound identity crisis and hindering progress (p. 158). This conflict is often portrayed through a Manichean lens, where colonialists attempt to enforce Western superiority and denigrate African traditions (Kang, 2004, pp. 16, 49). Moreover, cross-cultural negotiations, such as those related to the climate crisis, highlight the complexities of reconciling diverse perspectives and values (Röcklinsberg & Brodin, 2024). Miglietta (2024) explores how cultural negotiation plays out in religious transmission among first-generation Muslim immigrants, underscoring the dynamic adaptation of beliefs in new contexts. Wang and Cheng (2023) examine how English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) teachers in China negotiate language choice and identity, demonstrating the intricate nature of cultural exchange in educational settings. Such critical assessments move beyond simply describing cultural contact to analysing the power dynamics and transformative (or destructive) consequences of these interactions.

Identity Negotiation: At a personal level, characters are often forced to negotiate their own sense of self when caught between conflicting loyalties, duties, or worldviews. This internal struggle might involve reconciling traditional expectations with modern aspirations, or coming to terms with a redefined role within a fractured community. Frantz Fanon's work illuminates the profound psychological impact of such identity conflicts under colonial conditions, where the



colonised individual is compelled to navigate between an authentic self and an imposed identity (Fanon, 1967, p. 60). Garuba (2022) examines this by comparing Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* with Beckett's *Endgame*, arguing that both playwrights interrogate the "essence of the individual and his/her place in the universe in which meaning in existence... is believed to have been lost" (p. 119). This points to a deeper existential questioning within Soyinka's work, evaluating how individuals grapple with the fundamental absurdity of existence in a disrupted world.

Existential Negotiation: Going beyond the cultural and personal, Soyinka's characters frequently grapple with fundamental questions of fate, free will, honour, and sacrifice. Their actions can be seen as negotiations with the very meaning of their existence and their place within a cosmic or communal order. This form of negotiation transcends simple compromise, delving into profound moral and spiritual dilemmas where the stakes are life, death, and the soul of a community. Garuba (2022) highlights how his characters attempt "to demystify the complexity of human existence" (p. 120). Dobry (2015) introduces the "heroic fallacy" in social science, where critical events are often approached with a focus on individual actors' choices rather than deeper structural forces, which can obscure the true complexities of such existential negotiations (p. 94). This framework is crucial for critically assessing whether characters' choices are truly free or are constrained by overwhelming societal and historical forces, thereby moving beyond a mere description of individual struggle to an analysis of its underlying causes.

Symbolic Negotiation: Language, ritual, and symbols themselves become sites of negotiation. This involves how traditional symbols are understood, subverted, or reinterpreted in a changing context, and how different groups attempt to assert their authority or meaning through the manipulation of shared or contested symbols. Sabr and Janoory (2019) highlight how Soyinka's use of Yoruba culture, including ritual clothing and drumming, serves as a means of resistance against the imposition of Western cultural symbols, thereby engaging in symbolic negotiation (p. 206). Horvath (2015) contributes to this by examining the "genealogy of political alchemy" where symbols and practices are transformed to create new identities, often through coercive means (p. 73). This concept is especially relevant when colonial powers attempt to redefine or



replace indigenous symbolic systems. Additionally, research on travel constraint negotiation theory highlights the cognitive and behavioural strategies individuals use to overcome obstacles, which can be applied to understanding how characters negotiate symbolic barriers (Karl et al., 2021). The critical aspect here lies in examining whose interpretation of symbols prevails and the power dynamics that enable or thwart such symbolic negotiations.

Critically, these layers of negotiation rarely operate in isolation within Soyinka's plays. Instead, they form a complex web where failures in one dimension often cascade into others, creating a cumulative tragic effect. The paper does not merely catalogue these failures; it argues that the tragic outcomes stem precisely from the impossibility of genuine negotiation within these fraught liminal spaces, where conflicting ontological foundations and asymmetrical power dynamics render true compromise untenable. This impossibility is not simply a consequence of misunderstanding; it is a fundamental breakdown rooted in irreconcilable worldviews. Genuine negotiation, defined by criteria such as mutual recognition of differing worldviews, the willingness to compromise without sacrificing core identity, and equitable power distribution, is definitively absent. In these dramatic contexts, the colonial apparatus, for instance, does not enter a dialogue of equals, but asserts its dominance through legal and military force, precluding any outcome other than subjugation (Kang, 2004, p. 56). This active suppression of alternative perspectives, coupled with the rigid internal adherence to tradition, transforms the liminal space into a site of inescapable confrontation rather than constructive engagement.

Death and the King's Horseman: Liminality Interrupted, Negotiation Thwarted

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Elesin's ritual dance consummates his commitment to ancestral passage. Yet his ambition and male privilege—his decision to take a bride before death—reveals negotiation with mortality compromised by ego. Elesin's entry into this crucial liminal phase is fraught with internal conflict and external interference, transforming what should be a straightforward spiritual transition into a tragically failed negotiation. His internal struggle emerges as he succumbs to a final, worldly desire to take a young bride before his departure. This decision, seemingly a celebration of life, introduces a profound identity negotiation within himself. He attempts to reconcile his sacred duty with his lingering attachment



to mortal pleasures, a dangerous vacillation in a moment demanding absolute spiritual resolve. His poetic declarations, such as "Life is honour. It ends when honour ends" (Soyinka, 1975, p. 15), initially reflect a unified understanding of his role, where life and death intertwine in a cycle of honour. Yet, the sensual allure of the young woman undermines this resolve, leading to a subtle, personal failure of his commitment to the liminal purity required for the passage. This internal wavering sets the stage for the catastrophic disruption that follows, highlighting how even minor deviations from ritual protocol can have cosmic implications in a tightly woven metaphysical system (Jeyifo, 2004, p. 89). Sabr and Janoory (2019) identify Elesin's decision to take a bride as an instance of political leadership driven by desire, which ultimately leads to a "destruction of Nigeria's political leadership" as depicted in the play (p. 209). This framing emphasises that Elesin's personal choice is not merely a weakness but a significant act with profound public consequences. Owoeye (2012) further critiques Elesin's character as a "great philanderer" who "manipulates his role as a privileged one... into a demand for her acquisition" (p. 28). She argues that his personal desire, rather than a spiritual imperative, dictates his actions, a point that is often overlooked in broader analyses of the play's tragic elements. This internal negotiation, surrender to self-indulgence, critically compromises the ritual's integrity from within, pre-dating and exacerbating the external colonial disruption. It raises the critical question of whether Elesin's moral failing is a direct cause or merely a symptom of a deeper, already compromised cultural system, as explored by Ogundele (1994, p. 54). Bigot (2024) powerfully frames the trance dance at the play's centre as structurally dysfunctional, arguing that Elesin's ritual fails from both inner hesitation and colonial interference. Bigot contests readings that view ritual as celebratory, arguing that Soyinka situates ritual as a fragile domain, subject to internal and external collapse—a theatrical dissidence, not reassurance (Bigot, 2024, pp. 5–6). This interpretation accords with Soyinka's explicit disavowal of the cultural-clash model: the colonial event is "catalytic, not constitutive" (Soyinka, 2022, as cited in AfricanWriter), and the play's essence is metaphysical, rooted in the Yoruba cosmos rather than colonial dialectics. The anti-structure that emerges from Elesin's hesitation is thus not a space of transformative possibility, as Turner might suggest, but a corrupted void that actively prevents the ritual's proper execution,



demonstrating how a flawed internal negotiation can irrevocably warp a liminal passage. The play's careful staging, which subtly depicts Elesin's fading resolve even before the British arrival, highlights this internal corrosion. For instance, the Praise-Singer's anxious questioning of Elesin's dance, asking "Are there sounds there I cannot hear...?" and noting that Elesin has gone "far ahead of the world" (Soyinka, 1975, pp. 36–37), clearly signals a disharmony predating external intervention, indicating Elesin's ritual is already fractured.

The most devastating interruption of Elesin's liminal journey, however, comes from the outside: the intervention of the British colonial administration, primarily through District Officer Simon Pilkings. The encounter between Pilkings and the Yoruba community represents a fundamental clash of worldviews, leading to a profound, yet utterly futile, cultural negotiation. Pilkings, operating within a rigid framework of Western law and a profound lack of understanding of Yoruba metaphysics, views Elesin's ritual as a barbaric "custom" that must be prevented. His insistence on "civilised" order and the sanctity of human life (as defined by his own culture) directly clashes with the Yoruba understanding of death as a necessary continuum for communal survival. When Pilkings detains Elesin, proclaiming, "I have put a stop to it. It's an abominable custom" (Soyinka, 1975, p. 54), he unwittingly fragments a sacred liminal passage. This act is presented as a negotiation from the colonial perspective – a "discussion" of terms – but it is, in reality, an imposition of power. The community's desperate attempts to explain the cosmic implications of Elesin's failure fall on deaf ears, as their pleas are perceived as mere superstition rather than a vital explanation of their existential reality. The very possibility of genuine negotiation is thwarted by an unbridgeable ontological divide and the asymmetrical power dynamics inherent in the colonial encounter (Gibbs, 1986, p. 112). This external disruption traps Elesin in a tortured "anti-structure" – he is physically alive but spiritually dead, suspended in an agonising state of ritual impurity that contaminates his very being and the well-being of the community. Topper (2019) argues that this colonial intervention transforms Elesin's intended death rite into an "imperial possession rite," where his personal agency is usurped by "a stranger force of violence" (p. 56). This is not merely a cultural clash, but a "cosmological trauma" where the indigenous sacred order is actively disrupted and refigured by colonial power



(Topper, 2019, p. 54). Similarly, Montle (2021) argues that Pilkings' intervention caused Elesin to "turn his back from his cultural duty" (p. 161). Owoeye (2012) identifies Pilkings' behaviour as embodying the "overbearing position" of the colonial power. Kang (2004) contextualises this as the Western colonialism's unilateral imposition of its values, justifying its violent domination through assumed superiority (p. 56). This intervention is not an empathetic engagement, but a calculated act of power designed to dismantle local belief systems. The fundamental incompatibility of these worldviews means that Pilkings' actions actively prevent the regenerative potential of liminality, locking the community into a dislocated and compromised state rather than facilitating passage. The anti-structure created by this external imposition is profoundly destructive, as it does not allow for a reordering of values but rather a forced subjugation that strips the ritual of its cosmic efficacy, leaving a void where a transition should have occurred.

The tragic culmination of the play's interrupted liminality and failed negotiation is underscored by the return and ultimate sacrifice of Olunde, Elesin's eldest son. Olunde's self-sacrifice is often read as restoration. Adéèkó (2011) suggests a colonial comeback narrative: tradition reasserts itself despite imperial break. Yet this analysis fails to acknowledge Olunde's ethical clarity. He understands both worlds, negotiates internally, and submits to death not for tradition's sake but for cosmic necessity. Yet tradition does not evolve—his death does not open dialogue—it re-enacts sacrificial code. Soyinka neither romanticises nor dismisses sacrifice; he prescribes it but questions its efficacy. Olunde himself embodies a unique form of liminality, having spent years studying medicine in England. He exists "betwixt and between" two powerful cultural systems: the traditional Yoruba world he was born into and the Western modernity he has embraced. His education has given him a critical perspective on both, enabling him to understand the profound spiritual stakes of his father's ritual in a way the colonisers cannot, yet also exposing him to a different mode of existence. His return to Nigeria coincides precisely with the crisis, placing him squarely in the liminal void left by his father.

Olunde's actions represent a desperate, albeit ultimately tragic, existential and cultural negotiation. Upon learning of his father's failure, he immediately grasps the profound cosmic



imbalance and communal shame. His self-sacrifice is not merely an act of filial duty, but a powerful attempt to "re-negotiate" the broken pact with the ancestors and restore the disrupted cosmic order. He consciously steps into the liminal space that his father refused, understanding that "there is only one home for the life of a man, and that is where his honour lies" (Soyinka, 1975, p. 64). Olunde's death, performed with the very dignity and resolve that Elesin lacked, serves as a poignant, agonising correction. It is a negotiation not with the living, but with the spiritual forces that govern their world, an act aimed at fulfilling the communal destiny that his father had betrayed. The profound paradox here is that the individual best equipped to bridge the two cultures ultimately pays the highest price to reaffirm the integrity of his own (Jeyifo, 2004, p. 95). This demonstrates agency within a failed negotiation, where an individual's drastic action attempts to salvage a situation that has otherwise collapsed. Ogundele (1994) contends that Olunde's act, while appearing to redeem family honour, actually reinforces the colonial victory by severing the lineage's power to conduct the ritual, making the triumph of colonialism permanent (p. 158). This directly challenges the notion that Olunde's death is purely redemptive, suggesting a more complex and tragic outcome. Kang (2004) characterises Olunde as a "true revolutionary" who uses his Western education to fight against European domination, thereby transforming himself into an authority figure for his people (p. 38). His sacrifice is not a concession to tradition but a conscious act of resistance and leadership, directly contradicting the colonial narrative of cultural inferiority.

The consequences of this pervasive failure of liminal transition and negotiation are catastrophic, plunging the community into profound dislocation and despair. Elesin's unfulfilled rite leaves the spiritual passage to the ancestors open and corrupted, casting a shadow of disharmony over the entire social fabric. The communal grief is compounded by shame and anger, as the very foundation of their cyclical understanding of life and death has been desecrated. The women of the market, particularly Iyaloja, who had so passionately supported Elesin's passage, are left to witness the ultimate betrayal and its chilling aftermath. Her final, devastating pronouncements over Elesin's body, and her sombre farewell to Olunde's bride, underscore the irreversible damage. "The world is an abomination, and this child is born into a

world of shame" (Soyinka, 1975, p. 76), Iyaloja laments, highlighting the spiritual pollution that now afflicts the unborn generation. The community is left in a state of suspended animation, a pathological liminality where cosmic balance remains unrestored, and the path forward is obscured by unresolved grief and the haunting specter of a sacred duty abandoned. This tragic outcome serves as a potent illustration of how the failure to successfully navigate a liminal period, particularly when external forces thwart indigenous negotiation processes, can lead to profound and enduring communal trauma, a point often emphasised in postcolonial critiques of cultural imposition (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). The play's tragic trajectory was even reflected in its initial theatrical run, as the Lincoln Center Theater shortened its production, indicating the challenging nature of its subject matter for audiences ("Soyinka Play's Run Is Cut," 1987). Frank Rich (1987) critiques the production itself, noting that the poor acting "eviscerates a work that could well offer some of the 'threnodic essence' the author's note describes" (p. C.18). He also argues that despite Soyinka's stated intent, the play often comes across as a simplistic "clash of cultures" due to the dramatic choices made (Rich, 1987, p. C.18). This theatrical failure mirrors the narrative's depiction of a community plunged into a state of "unresolved grief and spiritual imbalance". Owoeye (2012) highlights how female characters, particularly the daughters of Iyaloja, are relegated to roles that reinforce patriarchal control, even as they participate in the rituals (p. 25). This subtle gendering of roles means that even Iyaloja's powerful pronouncements ultimately underscore the systemic limitations within the community's response to crisis, rather than offering a path to genuine liberation.

The Strong Breed: Inherited Liminality and Coercive Negotiation

In *The Strong Breed*, Eman is born to carry collective sin; he initially flees, and then chooses to return. Salami (2023) reads this as internalising patriarchal coercion. Onuoha & Uwah (2023), by contrast, perceive Eman's return as moral agency. The truth lies in their tension: ritual kills, but choice resides within death. Negotiation is ambiguous: the community imposes, but he consents. Ritual becomes coercive script, but executed ethically. Soyinka critiques communities that enforce tradition without introspection—a "parasite on the soul" (Soyinka, 1988, p. 66). The community remains unchanged; ritual performance recurs while selfhood is annihilated. The play

centres on the annual "Carrier" ritual of a village, a purification ceremony where a designated individual is compelled to bear the accumulated evils and defilements of the community into the wilderness, effectively acting as a scapegoat. The protagonist, Eman, belongs to the titular "strong breed," a lineage whose members are pre-ordained to serve as these communal carriers. This familial inheritance thrusts Eman into a perpetual state of "in-betweenness"; he is marked from birth as distinct from the average villager, destined for a role that separates him from the ordinary rhythms of life and places him on a permanent threshold between the community's purity and its collected defilement. Even when he attempts to flee this destiny, seeking a new life in another village, the pull of his inherited liminality remains, a spiritual tether that binds him to his unavoidable fate. He actively tries to negotiate an escape from this predetermined path, articulating his desire for a life free from the "burdens" of his past (Soyinka, 1973, p. 20). Onuoha (2023) highlights how Eman's identity is defined by masculinity and mortality within the play, where the "true man" is willing to die for others (p. 22135). This framing suggests that Eman's struggle is not just individual but a negotiation with deeply ingrained cultural expectations of male sacrifice. Salami (2023) further contends that the play critiques societal pressures that enforce predetermined roles based on patriarchal lineage, limiting individual freedom.

Despite Eman's efforts to sever ties with his past, the community's rigid adherence to tradition and their brutal methods of enforcing it represent a form of coercive negotiation. The village elders, particularly Jaguna and Oroge, embody this unyielding force. Their primary concern is the annual cleansing of the village, and they are willing to employ any means necessary – including manipulation, deceit, and violence – to secure a carrier. When Ifada, a mentally challenged outcast, is chosen as the scapegoat, Eman's innate compassion and his ingrained sense of responsibility (a characteristic of his "strong breed") are exploited. His initial protection of Ifada inadvertently draws him back into the ritual's orbit. The elders' pronouncements, such as Jaguna's cold assertion that "The village must be cleansed. The carrier must be found" (Soyinka, 1973, p. 25), are not open for debate but serve as demands for compliance. This is not a negotiation seeking mutual agreement, but one in which the dominant



power (the communal will, as interpreted by the elders) dictates terms, leveraging tradition and spiritual necessity to justify ruthless actions. The play demonstrates how, in a rigid societal structure, the liminal phase of communal purification can be forced upon individuals through a violent subversion of true negotiation. Onuoha (2023) argues that the play highlights how men manipulate "social customs that have been set by the patriarch, a social institution characterised by a power structure that does not allow for equality in gender relations" (p. 22137). This evaluation points to the inherent injustice and coercion within the community's traditional demands. Salami (2023) contends that this coercive approach to tradition suppresses individual autonomy and perpetuates cycles of violence within the community.

Eman's ultimate decision to take on the role of the carrier, despite his earlier resistance, illustrates a profound, tragic existential negotiation. His choice is not one of simple submission, but a complex act driven by compassion for Ifada, a deep-seated, perhaps unconscious, acceptance of his inherited purpose, and a desire to fulfil a ritual that he recognises, even in its cruelty, as fundamental to the community's continuity. His "negotiation" is with his own conscience, his lineage, and the very concept of sacrifice. In doing so, Eman becomes the ultimate liminal figure, bearing the accumulated transgressions of his society and entering a state of absolute "anti-structure" where his individual identity is subsumed by the communal burden. His agonising pursuit and eventual capture highlight the physical and psychological torment of this forced transition (Gibbs, 1986, p. 45). Onuoha (2023) further elaborates on Eman's complex position, stating that he "negotiated initiation by reflecting on what constitutes a man" and questioning the relevance of such rituals in modern life (p. 22139). His embrace of "Western values and traditional conceptions of masculinity" reveals a multi-layered identity negotiation (Onuoha, 2023, p. 22139). This indicates that Eman's decision is an active, albeit constrained, choice within a system that denies true negotiation. The individual, though seemingly making a choice, is still operating within the strictures of a predetermined cultural script, as noted by Olaniyan (2003) in his analysis of "prognostic" suicides (p. 105). The anti-structure that emerges during Eman's pursuit is not a space for communal re-evaluation, but a violent, dehumanising process that actively strips him of his individuality, forcing him into a predefined role as the

community's sacrificial object. This deliberate deconstruction of personal identity within the anti-structure highlights its destructive rather than regenerative capacity in this specific context. The chase scenes, vividly depicted in the stage directions, underscore this brutalisation, transforming communal action into an act of collective violence against a chosen individual (Soyinka, 1973, pp. 129–131).

The tragedy of *The Strong Breed* lies in the unresolved nature of this inherited liminality and the repetitive failure of negotiation to break the cycle of violence. Unlike a transformative liminal phase that culminates in a healthy reaggregation, the Carrier ritual, as depicted, merely cleanses the surface without addressing the underlying communal malaise or the inherent injustice of its demands. The community remains caught in a pathological cycle, continually needing to externalise its evils rather than engage in genuine self-reflection or reform. This perpetuates a form of societal liminality—a constant deferment of true internal reckoning, leading to repeated, brutal "negotiations" with its own conscience through the sacrifice of others. The play thus argues that when negotiation within a liminal context is solely coercive and driven by self-preservation at the cost of genuine ethical engagement, it merely entrenches an unhealthy pattern of violence and denial. The anti-structure here is not regenerative but a destructive force, as outlined by Thomassen (2015), where the process of schismogenesis perpetuates "an unpleasant, violent, harrowing, truly miserable existence" (p. 57). The community's reliance on a singular interpretation of masculinity, where death is the ultimate measure of a "real man", as discussed by Onuoha (2023), prevents any genuine negotiation for alternative paths or equitable solutions. This leads to a rigid system that continuously demands sacrificial victims. This resonates with the view that such societal reliance on ritualised violence, rather than enabling true progress, traps communities in a destructive cycle (Losambe, 2007, p. 28). Ultimately, this highlights a critical disjunction between the appearance of communal stability and the perpetuation of individual suffering. The anti-structure of the Carrier ritual actively undermines any potential for negotiation by creating a space where individual dissent is brutally suppressed, transforming communal action into an instrument of coercion rather than collective deliberation.

Conclusion



Soyinka's dramatic oeuvre articulates a unique entanglement of ritual, cosmology, and tragic fate. Particularly in *Death and the King's Horseman* (Soyinka, 1975) and *The Strong Breed* (Soyinka, 1973), Soyinka stages the threshold figures of Elesin and Eman as embodiments of fractured negotiation—between self and community, tradition and colonial modernity, cosmic duty and personal desire. This extended critical analysis argues that these plays enact a ritual failure, not simply by colonial disruption, but by internal collapse and structural violence where negotiation collapses across identity, symbolism, and power.

Drawing on Victor Turner's theory of liminality (Turner, 1969), Soyinka's own metaphysical dramaturgy (Soyinka, 1976; Soyinka, 1988), and recent scholarship (Abakporo, 2022; Bigot, 2024; Garuba, 2022; Onuoha & Uwah, 2023; Salami, 2023), this essay interrogates how failed negotiation is the tragic core in Soyinka's vision. Unlike earlier readings that emphasise cultural confrontation or heroic sacrifice, this argument emphasises ontological impasse—liminality without passage, negotiation without resolution. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Elesin's intended ritual journey into ancestral liminality is catastrophically interrupted by the unyielding force of colonial intervention. His personal wavering, exacerbated by the colonial powers' profound inability to genuinely negotiate across an ontological divide, results in a sacrilegious blockage of a vital spiritual passage. The tragic burden then falls upon Olunde, whose own cross-cultural liminality culminates in a desperate, albeit noble, self-sacrifice – a poignant attempt to re-negotiate cosmic balance that tragically underscores the destructive consequences of misunderstanding and imposed will. The play thus powerfully demonstrates how the intrusion of an alien structure can pollute and ultimately destroy the regenerative potential of indigenous liminal rites, leaving a community steeped in unresolvable grief and spiritual imbalance. This aligns with Montle's (2021) analysis that colonial intervention instilled an identity crisis by denigrating African culture and instilling a sense of inferiority, hindering societal progress (p. 158). Adéèkó (2011) further reinforces this, arguing that the closure by suicide in such narratives marks the "forceful and violent establishment of the rightfulness of [colonialism's] law-making powers" (p. 73), effectively ending an era for the colonised community. Abakporo (2022) positions African tragedy within cosmic balance: any action

disturbing life-death-unborn cycles precipitates doom. His readings of Soyinka and Esiaba Irobi plea for understanding tragedy beyond Aristotelian fall: tragedy in Soyinka is not hubris but rupture of cosmic harmony. Such a framing underscores the stakes of failed negotiation: the metaphysical structure Soyinka depicts tolerates no compromise. The consequences of this catastrophic interruption extend beyond immediate grief, highlighting how unresolved liminality, whether imposed externally or fractured internally, can "cement modernity's problems" (Thomassen, 2015, p. 40) by perpetuating cycles of cultural and individual stasis, hindering genuine societal evolution in the post-colonial context.

Similarly, *The Strong Breed* exposes a more insidious form of perpetual liminality embodied by the "strong breed" lineage, particularly through Eman. His attempts to negotiate an escape from this inherited burden are ultimately subsumed by a coercive communal "negotiation" that ruthlessly demands individual sacrifice for collective absolution. The village's ritual, while superficially cleansing, signifies a deeper, systemic failure of genuine dialogue, perpetuating a cycle of violence where the community avoids confronting its internal maladies by externalising them onto a scapegoat. Eman's tragic embrace of his fate, while an act of profound compassion simultaneously highlights the crushing weight of an unyielding tradition and the tragic impossibility of true negotiation when power is wielded coercively rather than communally. Onuoha (2023) critically observes that this traditional system, deeply rooted in patriarchal customs, compels men to conform to a singular definition of masculinity where self-sacrifice for the community is paramount, thereby stifling individual agency and leading to a perpetuation of oppression (p. 22141). This constant demand for male sacrifice for societal well-being is further explored by Salami (2023) who argues that such narratives reinforce specific gendered roles and expectations that are often detrimental to individual autonomy.

The literature as a whole reveals interpretive fissures: Turner posits failed ritual as abortive passage; Soyinka writes it deliberately fragile. Bigot (2024) frames ritual as critical laboratory, not reassurance. Salami and Onuoha debate masculinity's role, but both expose ritual's contested ground. Garuba (2022) connects Soyinka to absurdist modernism; Abakporo (2022) reframes tragedy cosmically. This essay synthesises these strands to argue that Soyinka's



threshold figures do not negotiate toward reconciliation but enact broken alignment. Ritual is not resigning itself to transformation; it tests community, ontology, and identity—and fails when negotiation ends.

Performance analysis further complicates understanding. Reviews of recent productions (e.g., Sheffield Crucible, 2025; Lawal, 2025) emphasise that Yoruba song and dance are crucial to spiritual resonance. Unless embodied properly, ritual fails not only in text but in experience. eNotes (2025) indicates many Western audiences default to cultural-clash interpretations, missing metaphysical negotiation entirely. This underlines Soyinka's point: negotiation must happen at sensory and epistemological levels—without which ritual fails anew. The film adaptation *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (Bande, 2022) foregrounds this translation challenge: translating ritual meaning between languages and cultural frameworks risks re-interruption of passage. Critiques from intercultural theatre studies, such as those by Fischer-Lichte (2004), underscore how the bodily enactment of ritual shapes audience perception, suggesting that a true understanding of Soyinka's plays requires engaging with their performative dimensions beyond mere textual analysis. This highlights the difficulty of translating the deep, embodied meaning of Yoruba ritual across different cultural and theatrical contexts, inevitably leading to a re-negotiation of the ritual's intended impact.

The final act of both plays is ambivalent: ritual occurs but meaning does not follow. Olunde dies, Eman dies, but tradition is unchanged, colonial law persists, community continues. Soyinka's theatre warns: liminal space must allow negotiation—symbolic, existential, communal—or threshold collapse becomes inevitable. Those who do not evolve, repeat sacrificial script with no renewal.

In conclusion, Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and *The Strong Breed* dramatise the critique of ritual ossification and negotiation's collapse. This dramaturgy refuses comforting reconciliation; it demands ethical negotiation and ritual adaptability. Through critical engagement with recent scholarship and Soyinka's own philosophical writings, this essay contends that Soyinka's tragic vision is one of ritual failure—an invitation to rethink tradition, negotiation, and cosmological continuity in post-colonial societies.



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