The reckless broom and virgin plots of lives: Change and traditional Nigerian society in Wole Soyinka's drama.

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THE RECKLESS BROOM AND VIRGIN PLOTS OF LIVES: CHANGE AND
TRADITIONAL NIGERIAN SOCIETY IN WOLE SOYINKA'S DRAMA

by

Handel Kashope Wright

A Thesis
submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through the Department of
English in Partial Fulfillment
of the requirements for the Degree
of Master of Arts at
the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada
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ABSTRACT

THE RECKLESS BROOM AND VIRGIN PLOTS OF LIVES:
CHANGE AND TRADITIONAL NIGERIAN SOCIETY
IN WOLE SOYINKA'S DRAMA

by
Handel Kashope Wright

One of the most significant problems facing Africa is the fact that the forces of change which have promoted economic and technological advancements have also caused the adulteration of traditional culture and values and the encroachment of more modern, more western ones. Urban centres have been affected most, and the rural areas remain tradition's last stronghold. Many African writers have addressed the advantages and disadvantages of this trend in their works.

This thesis examines three of Wole Soyinka's plays in an effort to determine his views on what the relationship between traditional Nigerian society and forces of change should be. Three forces of change are considered; modernization (and westernization) in The Lion and the Jewel, westernization in Death and the King's Horseman, and migration in The Swamp Dwellers. The plays are examined not only as literary works but also as socio-cultural comments. Both the topic and the approach taken, therefore, reflect the
Afrocentric perception of literature which insists that African literature must have not only aesthetic but also utilitarian value. Although the main focus is on the socio-cultural aspect of the relationship between change and traditional society, a few incursions are made into the political and historical aspects where necessary. Since Soyinka, like virtually every other African writer, sets his works in his country but primarily addresses his message to the entire continent, points made in the plays are assumed to have relevance for African society in general.

Collectively, the plays indicate that Soyinka acknowledges that modernization, westernization, and migration are formidable and sometimes beneficial forces of change. However, he sounds a warning against embracing them too readily and too completely since this could lead to the demise of traditional culture. He celebrates the strength of tradition in rural areas and advocates the preservation of traditional culture. The only forms of change he endorses are the rejection of particularly restrictive, destructive, or exploitative customs, and the introduction of carefully selected, beneficial aspects of change.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all of us who

... lost in the morning mist of an age at a riverside, keep wandering in the mystic rhythm of jungle drums and the concerto.

Okara, "Piano and Drums"
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I am deeply indebted to Dr. Bernard Harder for his exacting supervision of this thesis and for creating the cordial and inspiring atmosphere in which it was written. I am also grateful to Dr. John Ditsky, my second reader, and to Dr. Marlene Cuthbert, my outside reader, both of whose insightful comments proved invaluable. My thanks go to all the professors of the Department of English who have helped to broaden and deepen my knowledge of Literature, including and especially Dr. Roderick Huang, Dr. Eugene McNamara, Dr. Colin Atkinson, and Dr. Edward Watson. Finally, I would like to thank the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada which made it possible for me to study in Canada by providing me with a scholarship; my parents, Samuel and Abioseh Wright, and my siblings, Cream, Ebun and Rowland, all of whom provided long distance support and encouragement; Mrs. Beverly Stahlbrand who has fussed over me like a mother, and who, together with Mrs. Beth Proctor, has to put up with the idiosyncracies of graduate students; and Miss Nancy Peel who did such an excellent job of typing the manuscript and performed the minor miracle of deciphering my handwriting and meeting impossible deadlines, all without ever becoming exasperated.
Modern Nigerian Literature interprets Africa, both past and present, from the inside. Africa was interpreted and misinterpreted by outsiders long enough. Now its own writers are engaged in reassessing their past, in rediscovering their inheritance, in interpreting themselves both to their own people and to the rest of the world. This process has been of enormous value, both inside and outside Africa.

Margaret Laurence, Long Drums and Cannons.
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Change, Traditional Society and Soyinka:
The Theme and the Playwright
Baroka: I do not hate progress, only its nature
Which makes all roofs and faces look the same.
And the wish of one old man is
That here and there
Among the bridges and the murderous roads,
... between this moment
And the reckless broom that will be wielded
In these years to come, we must leave
Virgin plots of lives, rich decay
And the tang of vapour rising from
Forgotten heaps of compost, lying
Undisturbed...

This speech by Bale Baroka in Wole Soyinka’s The Lion and the Jewel is the reaction of a traditionalist to modernization and its relationship to traditional African society. The issue of whether and to what extent traditional society should accommodate change features repeatedly in Soyinka’s drama. Since the colonial era which introduced the mixed blessings of modernization and western culture to the continent, African societies have witnessed a diversification or, if you will, an adulteration of traditional culture. To a character like Lakunle in The Lion and the Jewel, modernization is a positive force which will free the rural community from regressive traditions and launch it into the modern world. To Baroka, it is a vast broom, a negative force which will sweep before it and destroy everything traditional, stripping the people of their heritage, their roots and their identity. Which of these

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viewpoints is accurate? Should rural African communities discard their traditions to embrace modernization or should they reject modernization and preserve their traditions?

Another force of change, westernization, has gone hand-in-hand with modernization. The post-colonial period has seen the spreading and entrenchment of western culture on the one hand and the advocacy of the preservation of traditional culture on the other. It was during the colonial era, however, that western language, literature, education, religion, social norms, etcetera, were introduced into African societies. Why, despite the physical presence of the colonialists and the imposition of their laws which reflected their values, did rural communities prove so resistant to westernization?

A third force of change, migration (both rural-urban and rural-rural) has, from earliest times, introduced individuals from other communities with different cultures into new communities. In some cases this has led the immigrants either to impose their culture on their new community or to adopt that community's culture. In most cases, however, the result has been a blending of the two cultures. It is generally acknowledged that large-scale rural-urban migration usually has a devastating effect on rural communities. How they are affected when immigrants decide to return home, however, is not so clear-cut. Also, it is not clear whether rural-rural migration is beneficial
or harmful.

This thesis treats Soyinka's depiction of the relationship between traditional Nigerian society and these three forces of change. Is confrontation the inevitable and only possible relationship that can exist between them? If compromise is feasible, what forms of change and how much change should be encouraged?

In The Lion and the Jewel, Soyinka presents a traditional village into which the first elements of modernization (a school teacher and his school) have only recently encroached. The village chief, Bale Baroka, the champion of tradition, and the school teacher, Lakunle, the champion of modernization, become rivals for the hand of Sidi, the village belle. The rivalry between the two men becomes a contest between tradition and modernization.

Death and the King's Horseman deals with a Yoruba community's predicament brought on by their chief's abortive attempt to comply with a custom that required him to sacrifice his life for the good of the community. The play is set in the colonial era and one of its secondary themes is the relationship between the British colonialists and the Yoruba. The colonialists display an attitude of superiority toward the Yoruba and insist on imposing laws which reflect western values on the community without attempting to understand the customs of the people. The Yoruba in turn are contemptuous of the colonial administration and resis-
tant to its attempts to interfere in their affairs. The District Officer's interruption of the Yoruba chief's suicide attempt leads to a series of confrontations between the colonialists and the Yoruba.

In *The Swamp Dwellers* Soyinka treats migration as a cause of change. In this play almost all the young men have left the village (tradition) for the city (modernization), and the play treats not a direct confrontation between tradition and modernization but the effect of the migration of young men on the village. The main focus, however, is on the relationship between two characters, Igwezu and a blind beggar who has migrated to the village from another rural area of the country. The beggar brings with him a new religion and different values, and causes at least one young man, Igwezu, to question and re-examine the norms, traditions and religion of the village.

Although this thesis is primarily concerned with Soyinka the playwright, it is necessary to point out and keep in mind the many other facets of his complex personality. Soyinka's Yoruba identity, his first hand knowledge of western society, the diversity of his creative writing talent, his political activism, and his high academic standing, all manifest themselves in his plays.

The Sierra Leonean critic, Eldred Jones, points out in *Wole Soyinka* that,

Apart from having been born a Yoruba and thus being naturally a part of the culture, Soyinka has
taken a deep and scholarly interest in the culture of his people.²

Oluwole Akinwande Soyinka was born on July 13th, 1934 in Ake, near Abeokuta in Yorubaland, Nigeria. He spent his first twenty years in Yorubaland and after travelling widely returned there to work at the University of Ife.³ In a move that underscored his Yoruba identity Soyinka repudiated Christianity and embraced traditional Yoruba religion in 1966. Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron, war and craftsmanship, is his favourite god.⁴ On the other hand, he has lived, studied and worked in Britain and continental Europe, and has travelled widely all over the world.⁵

Soyinka's twenty odd plays, two novels, and two books of poetry have earned him the reputation of being one of Africa's foremost literary figures. His considerable international stature as a writer was recently enhanced when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986.⁶ He developed an early interest in the theatre and wrote and performed in school sketches in Nigeria. After finishing his studies at Leeds he moved to London where he was attached to the Royal Court Theatre as a play reader, and since his return to Nigeria he has been active in the theatre. In fact, as James Gibbs points out, "it is as a man-of-the-theatre, actor, company creator, director, and, of course, playwright, that Soyinka has expended most energy and achieved most significance."⁷ Gerald Moore describes him as "the leading dramatist in Africa and one of the most
talented at work anywhere in the English-speaking world.”

Soyinka has also been very active in the sphere of politics. His many lectures, speeches, and fictional and non-fictional works on a variety of national and international political issues, combined with the fact that he had to leave Ife in the 1960s for "political reasons" and was later imprisoned from August, 1967 to October, 1969 for his political activism, is testimony to his very active involvement in politics. He has often been asked to play a direct role in Nigerian politics, to stand for election, even to head a political party. He has always demurred.

Still, Soyinka is not only part of his country's political conscience, he is literally its political prophet. His play A Dance of the Forests which, ironically, was first produced as part of Nigeria's Independence Celebrations, prophesied the corruption and disillusion that was to follow the initial euphoria over independence. Since then, he has recognized that, as he put it, "I have a special responsibility, because I can smell the reactionary sperm years before the rape of the nation takes place."

Soyinka graduated with an Honours Degree in English at Leeds University in 1957. Since then he has lectured at several universities including the University of Ife from 1962 to 1963, and the University of Lagos from 1965 to 1967. From 1973 to 1974 he was an Overseas Fellow at Churchill College, Cambridge and Visiting Professor at the University
of Sheffield. Early in 1976 he was Visiting Professor at the University of Ghana. Since 1976 he has been variously appointed Professor of Comparative Literature and Professor of Literature and Dramatic Arts at the University of Ife. He has written reviews, articles, and critical essays and delivered papers at a variety of literary and academic gatherings around the world. It is not surprising, therefore, that he enjoys a distinguished reputation as an academic, not only in Nigeria but internationally as well.

These several aspects of his personality make Soyinka at least as qualified as any writer one could name to address the issue of the relationship between forces of change and traditional Nigerian society. As a Yoruba and a Nigerian, he has an intimate knowledge of, and therefore can reflect accurately, the customs and values of his people in his works. As an academic and a literary critic he is familiar with the conventions of western dramatic genres and can blend them with traditional African genres like storytelling, ritual drama and formal praise-singing.

In spite of his international dramatic personality, Soyinka is first and foremost an African writer writing primarily for an African audience. As he himself put it during an interview,

"English of course continues to be my medium of expression as it is the medium of expression for millions of people in Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Gambia, Kenya, who I want to talk to, if possible. And I want to talk also to our black brothers in the United States, in the West Indies."
I want to talk also even to Europeans, if they are interested in listening. But they are at the very periphery of my concerns.14

Thus, like almost every other African writer, Soyinka sets his works in his country but writes for the whole continent. E.M. Birbalsingh has asserted that Soyinka's ideas are "firmly anchored in Yoruba tradition and African systems of metaphysical thought."15 Because of all this, certain aspects of his plays which are readily grasped by the African audience, especially the Yoruba audience, make much greater demands on an audience that is unfamiliar with the historical and modern culture and politics of Africa in general and Yorubaland in particular.

Some background knowledge of Yoruba mythology and culture and Nigerian history and politics is necessary to fully appreciate plays like A Dance of the Forests and Death and the King's Horseman. For example, to the audience unfamiliar with the concept of "Abiku," the full meaning and significance of the Half Child in A Dance of the Forests is probably lost. Similarly, the audience unfamiliar with Nigeria's colonial history, the Yoruba "Death of Death" concept, and the Egungun cult is at a distinct disadvantage as far as gaining a full appreciation of Death and the King's Horseman is concerned. The following point, made by Oladele Taiwo in his Introduction to West African Literature, is equally true of Soyinka's plays as it is of the works of African writers in general:
In order to understand modern West African writers fully, it is important to learn about the past to which they make constant reference, to know the political and social organization of traditional African society and how these differ from what happens now. Above all, it is most important that readers should appreciate West African religious beliefs and attitudes in order to understand the literature. The understanding of these points is basic to a full appreciation of modern West African work.

Most African writers and critics, including Soyinka himself, hold that Africa cannot afford art merely for art's sake, that African literature must also serve a utilitarian purpose. This thesis reflects the African perception of literature. It is not a merely aesthetic analysis of the selected plays. Rather, it takes the more comprehensive approach of considering the plays not only as literary works but as socio-cultural comments. Although the focus is on the socio-cultural aspect of the relationship between forces of change and traditional society, incursions are made into the political and historical aspects where necessary. Both the topic and the approach taken reflect a conviction that Soyinka's plays, like all African literature, should, and indeed, do have utilitarian value.
Notes


Jones 20.


Gibbs 5.


Gibbs 11.

Gibbs 5-6.


The False Prophet and the Voluptuous Beast: Champions of Modernism and Conservatism in *The Lion and the Jewel*
A dichotomy exists in modern African countries between urban and rural populations. The cities have thrown together people from different tribal and regional backgrounds in an environment of continual change: governments come and go, new products of technological advancement are constantly being introduced, and old buildings are torn down and new ones erected. As a result urban Africans are, for the most part, progressive in the sense that they are accustomed to taking rapid social, political, technological and environmental changes in their stride.

Though it is true that modernization has brought obvious improvements and advantages, to regard it as being wholly beneficial would be to ignore the problems it creates. One of the more controversial results of modernization has been the considerable erosion of traditional culture in cities; traditional village and tribal values, norms and allegiances have been largely replaced by more modern, and, often, more western ones. To give a specific
example, K.A. Busia asserted as long ago as 1961 in "The Conflict of Cultures" that the African family in the city had become substantially different from the traditional norm:

Traditional forms of behaviour, old sanctions of morality and conduct, the reciprocities and security of the large kinship group, all tend to change. The isolation of the family unit in the town, the splitting up of domestic groups of kinsfolk between urban and rural communities, the new social contacts and relationships in a competitive capitalistic economy, all compel changes in the established ways.*

Rural communities have, in contrast, tended to maintain traditional culture. The farther villages are from the nearest town, the more traditional they tend to be, and though they are becoming increasingly rare, there are still remote villages, often deep in the jungle and inaccessible to motorized traffic, which have had very little contact with the outside world. Traditional culture has survived unchanged for centuries in such settlements and the inhabitants live much as their ancestors did. They could therefore be considered conservative in the sense that they are unaccustomed to rapid and radical change.

In Nigeria, as in most African countries, the government, aware of the great and ever-widening gap between urban and rural areas, has launched government projects and encouraged the villagers to organize self-help projects aimed at modernizing the villages. Underlying the resultant flurry of activity, the construction of access roads,
bridges, schools and hospitals, are the assumptions that modernizing the villages is sound policy and that the villagers are willing and eager to be part of modern society. The following extract from an article titled "Nigeria at 26: The March to Recovery" reflects this attitude:

Eighty per cent of Nigeria's population lives in rural areas. The peasants till the land and grow most of the food that the country consumes. Yet most of them live in abject poverty. They go without such amenities as pipe-borne water or electricity. They often have to struggle through unmotorable roads, some of them no better than bush paths, to bring the food they grow to the urban areas. In fact, not more than 27 per cent of the nation's resources have ever been invested in the rural areas.

But now the Government is making moves to change all that. President Babangida announced in his 1986 budget speech that he was setting up a directorate to take charge of opening up the rural areas. Perhaps to underscore the importance the Government places on this issue, the Directorate of Food, Roads, and Rural Infrastructures is in the Office of the President.

The problem with this approach is that it advocates modernization without acknowledging that it could have consequences detrimental to the preservation of traditional culture. Also, while it is true that most rural communities are eager to become modernized, it is erroneous to presume that this holds true for every case. In The Lion and the Jewel Soyinka uses the fictional Ilujinle—a perfect example of the remote, traditional village—as the setting to dramatize the possible conflict that could arise.
when forces of modernization come up against resistance from those of entrenched conservatism.

Reduced to its simplest interpretation, the play deals with the rivalry between the village chief, Baroka, and the village school teacher, Lakunle, for the hand of Sidi, the village belle. Baroka, being a traditional ruler who has resisted the encroachment of modernization into Ilujinle, is easily identified as the champion of tradition and conservatism while Lakunle, who is presumably the only villager with a formal education, with his western and modern clothes and ideas, is the champion of modernization. With these two characters contending not only for Sidi's hand but for control of Ilujinle, the stage is apparently set for a confrontation between tradition and change.

The play does not portray a contest between forces of equal strength since several factors weigh in the Bale's favour. First, the village is entrenched in tradition. The fact that the stranger from the city finds Ilujinle only because he stumbles on Sidi accidentally at a stream, presumably on the outskirts of the village, and only after he had been forced to abandon his car and trek deep into the jungle, battling violently with the undergrowth, is indicative of the village's remoteness. He brings with him items which though common in modern society are strange and fascinating to the villagers: a car (which for them is the devil's own horse), a motor-bike (the horse with only two
feet), a camera (the one-eyed box), and photographs (images).

The odan tree and the bush school in the opening scene are symbols of tradition and modernization respectively. Soyinka underscores their symbolic role by having Lakunle make his first appearance from the school and Baroka make his from behind the odan tree. It is significant that the tree occupies center stage and dominates the village center while only one wall of the school appears onstage, flanking the stage to the right. Tradition, therefore, like the odan tree, is deeply rooted in the village and dominates the lives of the villagers while modernization, like the school, is of peripheral interest and has limited influence on the villagers’ lives.

Second, because of the belief, prevalent in traditional African societies, that wisdom comes with age, the villagers are much more likely to understand, respect and be influenced by a man in his sixties like Baroka than a youth of twenty-two like Lakunle. Thus the disparity in their ages puts Lakunle at a definite disadvantage when it comes to influencing the lives of the villagers.

Third, as Bale, or Chief, Baroka wields the real power of a traditional ruler in a traditional village and his authority seems absolute since, apparently, he is the only figure of authority in the village. All the villagers owe their allegiance to him as their sanctioned ruler, leader
and guide. Lakunle on the other hand is only a school teacher and has no authority over anyone except, perhaps, his pupils.

The form the relationship between tradition and change takes in the play, therefore, reflects the considerable advantage tradition has over change. Baroka need only maintain the status quo while Lakunle has the uphill task of bringing about radical social change. Lakunle fails both to win Sidi and to win converts to modernization, not only because he is operating from a position of weakness but also because of his attitude to the villagers and their traditional ways, the methods he employs to woo Sidi and to convert the villagers, and his unsuitability for his chosen role as reformer and champion of progress.

Lakunle is convinced that traditional African culture is inferior and, therefore, should be done away with completely and replaced with a modern, western culture. He has, therefore, taken on the role of reformer. Convinced of the superiority of modern culture, he dresses, speaks and behaves like a "modern" man:

He is dressed in an old style English suit, threadbare but not ragged, clean but not ironed, obviously a size or two too small. His tie is done in a very small knot, disappearing beneath a shiny black waistcoat. He wears twenty-three-inch-bottom trousers, and blanco-white tennis shoes.

Lakunle's attire, his three piece suit (with, of all things, a black waistcoat), his white tennis shoes, etcetera, is
ridiculously inappropriate in this small traditional village in the tropics. The incongruous combination of a three-piece suit and tennis shoes and the fact that the suit is out of style, threadbare, rumpled and too small, makes him appear undignified and comical. Instead of the sophisticated, modern figure he hopes to cut, Lakunle simply appears ludicrous and comical, not only to the villagers but to the audience as well. Neither is inclined to take him seriously.

Because he has no respect for traditional culture or its adherents, Lakunle looks down on the other villagers, confident that as a modern man he is superior to them. He refers to the villagers as "bush minds," a "race of savages," and to the Bale as a "die hard rogue" and a "voluptuous beast"; even his beloved Sidi is an "Ignorant girl," an "uncivilized and primitive-bush girl." The villagers, however, are neither impressed by him nor offended by what Sidi calls his "fine airs." They find him baffling, even amusing:

Is it Sidi
They call a fool— even the children—
Or you with your fine airs and little sense!
(p. 3)

By insisting on being different, Lakunle only succeeds in isolating himself from the rest of the village. When the Bale makes his first appearance, all the other characters greet him in the traditional fashion, prostrating or kneeling. Lakunle, however, greets him in the western,
"civilized" fashion, bowing deeply from the waist—a meaningless gesture in this setting. In this scene, with the other villagers prostrated or kneeling and Lakunle conspicuously standing, Soyinka captures both Lakunle's isolation from his society and the incongruity of his modern behaviour.

Because they are based on western culture, Lakunle's arguments are meaningless to the villagers. For example, he insists on employing the rituals of chivalric, western romantic love to court Sidi:

LAKUNLE: [down on his knees at once. Covers Sidi's hands with kisses.
My Ruth, my Rachel, Esther, Bathsheba
Thou sum of fabled perfections
From Genesis to Revelations
Listen not to the voice of this infidel... . .

SIDI: [Snatches her hand away.]
Now that's your other game
Giving me funny names you pick up
In your wretched books.
My name is Sidi. And now, let me be.
My name is Sidi, and I am beautiful . . .
I need no funny names
To tell me of my fame. (pp. 19-20)

Sidi's reply illustrates that in an environment that has no tradition of western romantic love and to a girl who is not even a Christian (Sidi is a Muslim name), Lakunle's wooing is strange, meaningless and irritating. It is not surprising then that it leads Sidi to conclude that the rest of the village is probably right in thinking he is mad.
Also when Sidi puts forward a strong, tradition-based argument in favour of the bride-price, Lakunle's initial response is a barrage of polysyllabic words which not only fail to counter Sidi's point, but are quite meaningless to her since they are English words (we can assume all the characters speak Yoruba except for Lakunle who sometimes switches to English, usually to impress his audience):

SIDI: They will say I was no virgin
That I was forced to sell my shame
And marry you without a price.

LAKUNLE: A savage custom, barbaric, out-dated,
Rejected, denounced, accursed,
Excommunicated, archaic, degrading,
Humiliating, unspeakable, unpalatable.

SIDI: Is the bag empty? Why did you stop?
(p. 7)

Through his "enlightened," modern pronouncements and his pro-modernization speeches, Lakunle inadvertently reveals his lack of understanding of the modern world and his attraction to the trivial trappings of modernization rather than its more substantial aspects. The picture he paints of the modern couple he and Sidi will become illustrates this point:

LAKUNLE: Together we shall sit at table
Not on the floor—and eat,
Not with fingers but with knives
And forks, and breakable plates
Like civilized beings.
(p. 8)

As Eldred Durosimi Jones points out, "quite obviously by isolating the most irrelevant and least valuable attribute of a certain type of plate, and using this as the mark of
civilization, Lakunle shows that he does not understand anything about plates or about civilization." Lakunle in fact needs no critics; his arguments are self defeating. Soyinka provides a deflating device within his speeches so that he empties his own arguments of all validity.

Lakunle's ridiculously male-chauvinistic assertion that scientists have proved that women have smaller brains than men, his emphasis on the trivial trappings of modernization (his modern wife would wear high-heeled shoes, red paint on her lips, and dance the waltz and fox trot in nightclubs at Ibadan), his out of fashion suit, and his limited English vocabulary (he owns only the Shorter Companion Dictionary) all point to the fact that he knows little about the modern world he purports to represent. His ideas of western society and modern African cities are in fact derived from what few books he has. He is, as Jones asserts, half-baked, an imitator rather than a reformer.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the villagers cannot take this oddly dressed character who speaks and acts so strangely seriously. Instead of a respected reformer, the villagers see Lakunle as a comical, slightly mad, sometimes irritating fool. Sidi sums up the villagers' attitude to him in the following speech:

SIDI: This is too much. Is it you, Lakunle, Telling me that I make myself common talk? When the whole world knows of the madman Of Ilujinle, who calls himself a teacher! Is it Sidi who makes the men choke
In their cups, or you, with your big loud words
And no meaning? You and your ragged books
Dragging your feet to every threshold
And rushing them out again as curses
Greet you instead of welcome. Is it Sidi
They call a fool—-even the children—-
Or you with your fine airs and little sense!

Though Lakunle's efforts to modernize the village were probably doomed from the start, he stood a very good chance of winning Sidi who was quite willing to marry him despite all his faults, if only he would pay her bride-price:

SIDI: I've told you, and I say it again
      I shall marry you today, next week
      Or any day you name.
      But my bride-price must first be paid.

(p. 7)

Lakunle, however, refuses to accommodate any aspect of tradition, including the bride-price. More than anything, it is his intransigence that makes the union impossible.

Because both Lakunle and Baroka want to marry Sidi they could be considered rivals. However, though Lakunle is very aware of Baroka's interest in Sidi, there is no evidence that Baroka is aware of his interest in her. Lakunle does not only fail to win Sidi, he is never even acknowledged as a rival by Baroka. Although he seizes every available opportunity to expound on the modernized Ilujinle he envisages, Lakunle never attempts to actually implement any of his ideas. The only features of modernization attributable to him are the village school, which he runs, and the Palace Workers' Union, which he probably suggested. Conse-
quently, he never represents a serious challenge to Baroka's control over the village either.

Apart from his several advantages over Lakunle, the main reasons for Baroka's success are his wiliness and his readiness to accommodate, or rather, tolerate certain aspects of change provided they do not threaten his comfortable, voluptuous lifestyle or cause radical change in the village. When he considers an aspect of change formidable and potentially disruptive, Baroka is resourceful enough to keep it out of his domain. The railway tracks which were to pass through Ilujinle and which Lakunle declared would have brought "Trade, Progress, adventure, success, civilization, Fame [and] international conspicuousity" to the village, were eventually laid many miles away because Baroka bribed the surveyor.

It is a combination of wiliness, flexibility and self confidence born of years of experience dealing with women that Baroka uses to win Sidi. In contrast with Lakunle who refuses to compromise his stand against tradition, Baroka is more flexible and actually utilizes modernization to his advantage. The stamp machine, a contraption from the modern world, plays a prominent role in his seduction of the naive Sidi.

Sidi refuses to marry Lakunle primarily because he is unwilling to pay her bride-price, but also because she is unimpressed with his "western" courtship. Baroka employs
the more traditional method: he sends his senior wife, Sadiku, to woo Sidi on his behalf. Sidi, however, rejects him too, claiming the chief is too old and that her beauty would be wasted on him. The ingenious Baroka then tells Sadiku in confidence that he has become impotent, knowing she would not keep his "secret." As Baroka had hoped, Sidi rushes to the palace to mock him when she hears of his impotence. He then proves he is still the "devil among women" when he seduces her by playing on her naivety and her pride. Lakunle is willing to marry the "fallen" Sidi but she dismisses him contumely and opts to marry Baroka.

Both Sidi and the village as a whole choose tradition over modernization. More specifically, they choose the well established, traditional world they comprehend and feel comfortable in over the futuristic, muddled and incomprehensible world that exists only in Lakunle's imagination.

Apart from Lakunle's attempts at modernizing the community from within there are external forces of modernization acting on Ilujinle. Soyinka incorporates two past events into the play: the attempt to lay railway tracks through the village and an earlier visit by the photographer from the city. These incidents are not merely previous encounters with modernization but attempts that had been made by external forces to bring modernization to Ilujinle.

The author draws attention to these encounters and underlines their significance by having the characters act
them out in mime rather than simply narrate them. The switch to mime captures the audience's attention then forces the audience to concentrate on the actors' movements since this is the medium through which the story is related.

Although both mimes constitute plays within the play, Soyinka handles the first so skillfully that it blends into and becomes a continuation of the main plot. He achieves this by making the mime a dance which Sidi suggests she and the other youths of the village perform:

SIDI: [wildly excited] I know. Let us dance the dance of the lost Traveller.
SHOUTS: Yes, let's.
SIDI: Who will dance the devil-horse?
You, you, you and you.
[The four girls fall out.]
A python. Who will dance the snake?
Ha ha! Your eyes are shifty and your ways are sly.

(p. 13)

The youths' enthusiastic response to Sidi's suggestion makes it obvious that this dance is one they had performed before. The fact that roles are assigned right before the audience's eyes and the relaxed, jocular atmosphere of the whole scene reinforce the idea that the dance is simply spontaneous playacting by Sidi and her friends. Soyinka, therefore, avoids the usual complete break in the plot which flashbacks usually involve by presenting this re-enactment in such a way that it comes across as a spontaneous consequence of the action preceding it.

The relationship between the dance and the main plot is complicated and made more interesting by Baroka's first
appearance on stage during the dance. His entrance is a complete surprise to the dancers who immediately abandon the dance to greet him. Baroka, however, is intent on participating in the mime and has timed his entrance so that he has appeared on the scene exactly when he is supposed to appear in the mime. After exchanging a few pleasantries with Lakunle he launches into his role as himself, causing the other characters to assume their roles and continue the mime. Thus Soyinka uses Sidi's suggestion to make a smooth transition form the main plot to the mime, then uses Baroka's entrance to make the transition back to the main plot and Baroka's willingness to participate in the mime to make the transition into the mime again. When the zestful and mischievous Bale takes control over the scene, he orchestrates the events in such a fashion that the audience is teased into trying to figure out when they are watching the main play and when the play within the play, and even the characters become uncertain as to what play they are in:

BAROKA: A-ah Mister Lakunle. Without these things you call Nonsense, a Bale's life would be pretty dull. Well, now that you say I am welcome, shall we Resume your play? [turns suddenly to his attendants.] Seize him!

LAKUNLE: [momentarily baffled.] What for? What have I done?

BAROKA: You tried to steal our village maidenhead. Have you forgotten? If he has, serve him a slap To wake his brain. [An uplifted arm being proffered. Lakunle quickly recollects and nods his head vigorously. So the play is back in performance . . . ]
Unfortunately, the second mime is not handled quite as imaginatively. It is a conventional flashback involving the usual break in the main plot while the mime is being performed.

The second mime depicts how Baroka prevented railway tracks from being laid through Ilujinle by bribing the surveyor. The first tells of a later encounter involving a photographer who happened to meet Sidi at the village stream and was brought into the village by an angry mob of villagers who thought he was intent on harming her. Baroka plies him with food and drink, allows him to take as many pictures as he wants—especially of Sidi—and sends him on his way.

Both these mime scenes illustrate Baroka's determination and ability to steer agents of modernization that could bring radical change away from his domain. However, although he is completely successful at getting the railway tracks laid many miles from Ilujinle, he is not as successful with the photographer who returns to the village with the magazines containing photographs of Sidi that go to her head and make her think she is too beautiful to marry anyone, including the Bale. With time, the external forces of modernization, therefore, become more persistent and more successful in their attempts to bring change to the village.

The scenes also reveal Baroka's readiness to resort to the
most unscrupulous measures to achieve his goals and foreshadow his conquest of Sidi through deception and seduction.

Critics unanimously acknowledge that Soyinka is on the side of Baroka and tradition in this play. None of the villagers, including the other major characters, Baroka, Sidi, and Sadiku, take Lakunle seriously and the playwright seems intent on making sure the audience share this attitude. One of the strongest pointers to this is the fact that Lakunle's name is conspicuously absent from the title of the play. Despite his significant role in the play, Soyinka snobs him by insisting that the play is about the Lion and the Jewel—Baroka and Sidi. Also, from the opening scene in which Lakunle falls over and spills a bucket of water all over himself he is belittled in the eyes of the audience. His ideas are ridiculous not only to the traditional villagers but also to any audience, traditional or modern. The audience cannot even sympathize with him at the end of the play for losing Sidi because their last glimpse is of a contented Lakunle clearing a space to dance with another attractive young girl who is obviously interested in him. Also, Baroka is triumphant not only over Lakunle but over the external forces of modernization as well. And he wins Sidi despite the combined influence of Lakunle (the internal force of change) and the magazine photos (instruments of an external force of modernization) on her.
Several critics, including Bill Walker in "Mime in The Lion and the Jewel," Adrian Roscoe in Mother is Gold, and Eldred Jones in The Writing of Wole Soyinka, have identified Baroka's speech on traditional society and progress as the most important in the play:

BAROKA: I do not hate progress, only its nature Which makes all roofs and faces look the same. And the wish of one old man is That here and there [Goes progressively toward Sidi, until he bends over her, then sits beside her on the bed.] Among the bridges and the murderous roads, Below the humming birds which Smoke the face of Sango, dispenser of The snake-tongue lightning, between this moment And the reckless broom that will be wielded In these years to come, we must leave Virgin plots of lives, rich decay And the tang of vapour rising from Forgotten heaps of compost, lying Undisturbed . . . But the skin of progress Masks, unknown, the spotted wolf of sameness . . . . Does sameness not revolt your being, My daughter?

(p. 52)

The critics assert that Baroka becomes Soyinka's mouthpiece in this speech since he voices what is almost certainly the playwright's position on how traditional Nigerian society should respond to modernization. This makes The Lion and the Jewel one of the few plays in which Soyinka makes his stand overtly explicit. Through Baroka Soyinka asserts that though it brings many benefits, modernization blurs people's traditional tribal identities, creating the much less interesting situation in which everyone is covered in the
"skin of sameness": modern culture. There must therefore be some places at least where traditional culture is kept alive. Secondly, the fast pace of developed areas is not attractive to everyone and there must be places where people who prefer a more laid-back atmosphere can live.

Though Baroka voices the playwright's stance he is not exactly the epitome of traditional virtue. As Lakunle rightly observes, Baroka is a

Voluptuous beast! He loves this life too well To bear to part from it. And motor roads And railways would do just that, forcing Civilization at his door. He foresaw it And he barred the gates, securing fast His dogs and horses, his wives and all his Concubines. . . .

(p. 25)

Greed, selfishness and self-indulgence are what really motivate this champion of tradition's "brave" stand against modernization. Even while he makes his most significant and persuasive speech on the need to preserve tradition, his preoccupation is with seducing Sidi.

This reflects a strength rather than a weakness in Soyinka's artistry. It indicates that Baroka is only human. While neither he nor tradition is perfect they still represent a better alternative to Lakunle and his brand of modernization. Thus Soyinka avoids falling into the trap of making a character whose stance he identifies with perfect and, therefore, unconvincing.

Baroka's maintaining of the status quo for selfish reasons is illustrative of the drawback in traditional
autocracy. Sadiku's celebration of Baroka's alleged impotence is another pointer to the fact that traditional culture is not without flaws:

SADIKU: . . . This is the world of women. At this moment our star sits in the centre of the sky. We are supreme.

(p. 34)

Her speech is a radical statement that goes beyond the feminist assertion that men and women are equal to claim the albeit temporary superiority of women. This underscores Eldred Jones' point that Sadiku's narration of how she "scotched" Baroka's father Okiki explodes the myth that women are content with polygamy and their place as subordinates in traditional society. Sadiku and Sidi's perverse pleasure in Baroka's "impotence" is a result of and a reflection on a system that denies women the opportunity to compete with men in any sphere other than the bedroom.

The Lion and the Jewel is one of Soyinka's earliest plays and one in which he seems to be less concerned with portraying a realistic traditional setting. Even so, those ardent Negritude writers like Leopold Senghor of Senegal and Jacques Romain of Guinea who have insisted on romanticizing traditional Africa and portraying it as a virtual utopia tainted only by colonization and post-colonial westernization can learn a lot from the almost instinctive realism and the implicit criticism of traditional Africa in the play.

For policy makers, the play provides even more cause for reflection. It nullifies the assumption that all of
rural Africa is eager to embrace modernization. This is not to suggest that rural Africa is opposed to modernization. Ilujinle has a well attended school which shows that the villagers value education. Baroka's staff have set up the Palace Workers Union which has already successfully negotiated a day-off every week for its members. The villagers are very selective: they have embraced only those facets of modernization they are convinced will be of the greatest benefit to the community and have laughed off the rest of Lakunle's proposals.

Traditional culture has become adulterated in the cities and Soyinka's message to educated Africans, especially government officials, is that they need to pause from the race for development to remind themselves that rural areas are the last strongholds of traditional culture. If the broom of modernization is wielded in rural areas with the same, almost indiscriminate abandon as in the cities, it could well lead to the demise of authentic traditional culture. Rural development should be approached from the standpoint that traditional culture is basically good, precious and endangered. Developers should be as selective as the villagers of Ilujinle, introducing only those aspects of modernization they and the villagers, who are usually most conscious of the need to conserve tradition, perceive as being truly beneficial to these communities.
Lakunle is Soyinka's warning against Africans attempting to abandon their traditional culture to adopt western/modern culture. Because he has rejected traditional culture, Lakunle does not fit comfortably into the mainstream of his community. And because he does not know enough about nor understand the modern/western culture he purports to represent he could never fit into either modern African or western society. His modernism is, in fact, a thin veneer he uses to cover his true self. When he lets down his guard, for example, when he takes part in the dance of the lost traveller and when he dances with the seductive girl at the end of the play, the real Lakunle, a fun-loving, mischievous character who immerses himself with obvious relish in traditional customs, emerges. The preachy, aloof, conceited, bumbling Lakunle is obviously one he cultivates to distinguish himself as a modern, enlightened individual. Soyinka's point, which he repeats in his novel, *The Interpreters*, in which he satirizes Nigeria's "westernized" academia, is that it is difficult if not impossible to simply abandon one's culture. Attempts to embrace an alien culture only lead to artificial, phony, and ultimately, absurd behaviour.

Lakunle could also be seen as a warning against the idea that an educated person, no matter how limited his education, should automatically become a leader and role-model in a community where everyone else has much less or no
formal education. Considering the long and widespread popularity in West Africa of James Henshaw's play, *This is Our Chance*, especially as a staple of secondary school drama productions, it is surprising that critics, especially West African critics, fail to mention the similarity between Lakunle and Henshaw's Bambulu. The following speeches, the first by Bambulu and the second by Lakunle, reveal a striking similarity between the two characters:

**BAMBULU:** (in a breezy and academic fashion): This is the child of my brain, the product of my endeavours, and the materialisation of my inventive genius. It is an anti-snake-bite vaccine. Western Science has not yet succeeded in producing anything so potent. But I, Bambulu (striking his chest), have, without laboratories, without any help, produced this medicine from the herbs of this village. (Growing more triumphant.) I am a scientist, I am an Analyst, I am a catalyst.

**LAKUNLE:** A Savage custom, barbaric, outdated, Rejected, denounced, accursed, Excommunicated, archaic, degrading, Humiliating, unspeakable, redundant, Retrogressive, remarkable, unpalatable.

They are both rather opinionated, egotistical, and given to using strings of polysyllabic words for bombastic effect. Like Lakunle, Bambulu is an educated man in a village of uneducated people. Unlike Lakunle, however, Bambulu is much more successful at effecting change in his community. He saves the chief's daughter's life with his anti-snake-bite vaccine, ends the long standing feud between him and the neighbouring village, argues eloquently and successfully for an intruding alien's life to be spared, and
persuades the villagers to tolerate inter-village marriage. Henshaw obviously intends the audience to take him very seriously. Through Lakunle's muddled plans, Soyinka makes fun of the underlying assumption in Henshaw's play that an educated person knows what is best for a community of uneducated villagers. Education and a "progressive" outlook do not qualify an individual to hold sway over an entire community's destiny and are not in themselves a guarantee that the community will follow that individual if he held himself up as leader and guide.

Soyinka admits that The Lion and the Jewel was one of the most difficult plays to write. It is also one of the rare plays in which he makes his position overtly clear; discerning his position in his later works is much more of a challenge. Although the play is a well-written, uproarious comedy, it manages to convey several significant messages, especially to Africans.

While policy makers in Nigeria still tend to presume that rural communities are eager to become modernized, there has recently been a major, positive change in the government's rural development policy. Government officials now meet with villagers in what are being called "Village Square Meetings" to work closely with them in deciding what development projects should be approved:

In each port of call, the former governor and his commissioners would answer questions frankly and where necessary educate and enlighten the people on the issues involved. They were always careful
not to make promises which they could not fulfil. But at the end of every session, the government's party usually retired to the Government House to review the issues raised. And within 48 hours, directives were issued by the governor's office to the ministries and departments affected, asking them to carry out specific tasks observed from the previous visit. This system has worked wonders.**

It is unlikely that this change is in direct response to The Lion and the Jewel, a play first published in 1963, but such change does illustrate the fact that the messages in Soyinka's plays can be of practical, utilitarian value.

While most critics, in discussing The Lion and the Jewel as a humorous play which treats some serious issues, have assumed that Soyinka's traditionalist stance is serious and legitimate, Lewis Nkosi in his Tasks and Masks dismisses Soyinka's stance as a mere prank:

Soyinka's tendency to come down on the side of traditionalism, sometimes no more than a mischievous prank to tease the committed modernist, only increases the fun but should never be taken as more serious than that.**

Nkosi's erroneous assertion is an example of how the light-hearted humour of the play can lead a critic into underestimating the seriousness of Soyinka's purpose and the genuineness of his traditionalist position. In fact there is a dark side to The Lion and the Jewel which even more perceptive critics, because they have devoted little or no attention to what the future holds for Ilujinle, have missed. Eldred Jones' assertion that change will inevitably come to Ilujinle only begins to address the problem of the village's future:
No doubt change is inevitable. The village school itself is an index of this. With the intrusion of the photographer too the village is shown to be vulnerable.¹²

The combination of the attempt to lay railway tracks through the village and the photographer's two incursions into the village illustrate not only that the village is vulnerable but also that forces of modernization are becoming more persistent and successful in their attempts to encroach into the village. Even more significant is the fact that the type of change they bring promises to disrupt if not destroy traditional culture. Sidi's awakening to her great beauty and her consequent heightened self-esteem and albeit transient independence could be regarded from a modernist, feminist point of view as a positive step forward. But from a traditional perspective—and too often critics completely disregard this perspective—her scornful rejection of Baroka amounts to disrespect for an elder, a threat to the chief's authority and reputation and a complete break from the traditional norm which dictates that a girl's family, not the girl herself, decides to whom she gets married. This defiant, confident, perceptive, liberated Sidi is created by the combined influences of Lakunle, the internal force of change, and the photographer's magazine pictures of her, instruments of the external forces of change:

SIDI: You waste your breath.
Why did Baroka not request my hand
Before the stranger
Brought his book of images?
Why did the Lion not bestow his gift
Before my fame was lauded to the world?
Can you not see? Because he sees my worth
Increased and multiplied above his own;
Because he can already hear
The ballad-makers and their songs
In praise of Sidi, the incomparable
While the Lion is forgotten.
He seeks to have me as his mere property
Where I must fade beneath his jealous hold.
Ah, Sadiku,
The school-man here has taught me certain things
And my images have taught me all the rest.
Baroka merely seeks to raise his manhood
Above my beauty
He seeks new fame
As the one man who has possessed
The Jewel of Ilujinle!

Whether one sees Sidi as a brave woman striking a blow
for individualism, feminism and progress or as a vain, saucy
girl attempting to humiliate the community's leader, it
remains indisputable that as a precedent, her stance
threatens to disrupt traditional society. Her break from
tradition is so radical that Sadiku cannot even begin to
comprehend her position:

SADIKU: [shocked, bewildered, incapable of making
      any sense of Sidi's words.] But Sidi, are you
      well? Such nonsense never passed your lips
      before. Did you not sound strange, even in your
      own hearing?

(p. 21)

The outside forces of change also bring with them a
different set of values. While there is a picture of Sidi
on the cover, the centre-fold pages and several other pages
of the magazine, Baroka, who is not only the chief but who
carries such honorary titles as "the Lion of Ilujinle," "the
Fox of the Undergrowth" and "the living god among men," is not featured quite as prominently nor as favourably:

SECOND GIRL: [contemptuous] ... it would have been much better for the Bale if the stranger had omitted him altogether. His image is in a little corner somewhere in the book, and even that corner he shares with one of the village latrines.

(p. 11)

This speech illustrates not only the photographer's contempt for Baroka and his position but the negative influence of his magazine on the village youth who come to share his contempt for the traditional ruler.

If Lakunle could be dismissed as an unsuitable representative of modernism, Ilujinle's only hope of being introduced to substantial, positive aspects of modernization lie with outside forces of modernization. It is disturbing to note, therefore, that the photographer's magazine with its pictures of Sidi in seductive poses is representative of exactly the type of superficial aspects of modernization Lakunle wishes to introduce into the village:

LAKUNLE: [with conviction.] Within a year or two I swear
This town shall see a transformation. ... The ruler shall ride cars, not horses
Or a bicycle at the very least.
We'll burn the forest, cut the trees
Then plant a modern park for lovers
We'll print newspapers every day
With pictures of seductive girls.
The world will judge our progress by
The girls that win beauty contests.

(p. 37)

Apart from the fact that Sidi uses the magazine photos to enhance her self-esteem, the only effect the photogra-
pher's visit has is to belittle and humiliate the traditional ruler in the eyes of his subjects. Even without trying, therefore, the external forces of change attack the very foundations of the community's political structure. Worse yet, they seem to have little of substance to offer the villagers. Surely the humiliation and belittlement of a traditional ruler is a high price to pay for the acquisition of a copy of a magazine which contains photographs of the village and the village belle. Furthermore, there is the element of exploitation to be considered. The photographer undoubtedly made money from the pictures he took of Sidi and the village but all he gave the villagers in return was a copy of the magazine. The outside forces of change are becoming more persistent and successful and the aspect of modernization they have introduced into the village so far is insubstantial, negative, even exploitative.

Jones identifies the village school as the other index of the inevitability of change. What he does not discuss is the type of change the village school is likely to bring about with Lakunle as the children's teacher. Sidi's casual remark about Lakunle influencing his pupils has more serious implications than she realizes:

SIDI: [looks at him in wonder for a while.] Away with you. The village says you're mad. And I begin to understand. I wonder that they let you run the school. You and your talk. You'll ruin your pupils too. And then they'll utter madness just like you. (p. 10)
Lakunle has the village children to himself for hours every day and it is more than likely that apart from teaching them reading, writing, and arithmetic, he is instilling his muddled modern ideas into their young, impressionable minds. The villagers might dismiss him as an eccentric fool but the prospect of their children growing up to become "Lakunles" is a serious and definite possibility.

Critics' responses to Lakunle have ranged from Bill Walker's dismissal of him as "a pathetic symbol of modernity," to Eldred Jones' assessment of him as a foolish, errant young man who can be salvaged if only he would act more naturally, to Margaret Laurence's perception of him as a young man with a "ludicrously stilted concept of social virtues" who nonetheless has "something brave and moving... about his earnestness and his endeavour." Implicit in all these responses seems to be an assumption that Lakunle is harmless. John Povey comes closest to identifying the darker aspect of Lakunle's character when he points out another side to Lakunle's supposedly generous and gallant offer to marry the fallen Sidi:

Lakunle even offers to marry her in her disgrace, cannily observing that since she is no longer a virgin she cannot expect now to receive the required bride price. Such despicable bartering almost transposes Lakunle from the status of a fool to that of a rat, and yet it is all in character with his absurd and shallow understanding of things.

All along Lakunle had insisted that he objected to paying the bride price because it was a barbaric, traditional
custom, but after Sidi's seduction he seizes on another
traditional custom, one which dictates that no bride price
should be paid for a girl who is not a virgin, to justify
not paying the bride price. The incident is proof, as Povey
tentatively suggests, that Lakunle can be a rat, and it is
overgenerous of the critic to attribute this side of his
character to "an absurd and shallow understanding of
things."

These re-assessments of Lakunle and the outside forces
of change do not prove previous critics' observations about
them to be wrong nor do they negate Baroka's and tradition's
victory in the play. They definitely do not change the
play's message nor detract from the authenticity of Soyin-
teka's traditionalist stance. They do, however, add a new,
darker dimension to Lakunle and the external forces of
change and suggest that Ilujinle is a village under siege.
They also suggest not only that tradition's victory is
destined to prove temporary but also that tradition will
probably be replaced by Lakunle's brand of modernization.
Time is on the side of the forces of modernization. Lakunle
is only twenty-three while Baroka is in his sixties.
Working from within the village is Lakunle, who is a
bungling, misguided, but, as has been illustrated, also a
determined and sometimes devious advocate of modernization.
The Palace Workers Union and some of Sidi's modern ideas are
proof that even presently, Lakunle does influence the
villagers and that they do not always scoff at his ideas. The village school promises to enhance his influence considerably in the future when it yields a crop of Lakunle proteges. Working from the outside is the photographer who is becoming more persistent and successful at introducing modernization into the village. More significantly, these two forces collectively advocate a misguided, insubstantial and exploitative brand of modernization.

All of this forebodes a bleak future for Ilujinle, one which runs against the grain of the festive celebration of tradition's victory at the end of the play. This darker dimension to the play sends out a more urgent and serious plea for the recognition that traditional culture is valuable and endangered, a plea that Soyinka makes with less subtlety but with greater succinctness and passion through a single speech in another play, *The Road*:

It is our duty and a historical beauty. It shall always be, what we have, we hold. What though the wind of change is blowing over this entire continent, our principles and tradition . . . Yes, must be maintained. For we are indeed threatened, yes we are indeed threatened.
Notes


Wole Soyinka, The Lion and the Jewel (London: Oxford University Press, 1963) 1. All subsequent quotations from The Lion and the Jewel will be identified by page number.

Eldred Durosimi Jones, the Writing of Wole Soyinka (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1973) 27.

Jones 26.

Jones 27.

Jones 30.

James Henshaw, This is Our Chance (London: University of London Press, 1966) 13.


Jason, Thompson and Smith 15.


Jones 29.


Jones 30-31.


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Alien Steps and the Dance of Death:
Colonialist Interference in Yoruba Tradition
in *Death and the King's Horseman*
Alien Steps and the Dance of Death: Colonialist Interference in Yoruba Tradition in Death and the King's Horseman

In his Author's Note to Death and the King's Horseman Soyinka lashes out at the blurb-writer for the American edition of his novel Season of Anomy for claiming, erroneously, that the novel portrays a clash of cultures. To offset a repetition of this error Soyinka warns producers against attaching what he describes as "the facile tag of 'clash of cultures'" to Death and the King's Horseman. Insisting that the colonial factor is merely a catalytic incident, he asserts that:

The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind—the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links all; transition.¹

Although he refers specifically to producers, Soyinka obviously means to guide literary critics and all others who might attempt to interpret the play as well. This chapter will examine the relationship between the colonial element and the indigenous Yoruba people. It will focus particularly on the part the colonial element played in bringing about the tragic incidents in the play through its inability or unwillingness to understand the Yoruba and their culture and
its insistence on imposing the values of its own culture on the Yoruba.

This approach would appear to amount to a succumbing to the very temptation Soyinka warns against. However, a close examination of his objections to the clash of cultures interpretation of the play and an explanation of the perspective from which the relationship between the two sets of people will be examined will illustrate that the topic can be treated without necessarily incurring the wrath of the playwright.

Soyinka objects to the presupposition implicit in the clash of cultures interpretation that "a potential equality [exists] in every given situation of the alien culture and the indigenous, on the actual soil of the latter." The play portrays the Yoruba as a people steeped and entrenched in their traditional culture. The idea of a people torn between "the old ways" and new, western ways simply does not apply in this situation. The topic will, therefore, be treated with the awareness that rather than a clash of cultures of equal strength, the play depicts the interference of western culture—through the District Officer—in the traditions of a people who neither understand nor care for the values of that alien culture.

Soyinka also insists that the colonial factor is incidental and that the main focus of the play is on the universe of the Yoruba mind—the world of the living, the
dead and the unborn—and, more specifically, on the tragic or threnodic results of the metaphysical test of transition. The relationship between the colonizers and the Yoruba does appear to be prominent in the play nonetheless, and it is tempting to conclude that this far more simple and accessible theme is the play's main theme. To draw this conclusion, however, would be to succumb to what Soyinka would describe as a reductionist tendency. His dismissal of the Colonial Factor as merely catalytic is justified in so far as the Colonial Factor relates to the main theme of the Yoruba universe and the threnodic test of transition. However, it unfairly downplays the interesting and illuminating relationship between the colonizers and the Yoruba depicted in the play. This relationship will be explored with the awareness that it is a secondary theme rather than the play's main theme.

This topic has been chosen for discussion over the more challenging main theme because even though an exploration of the Yoruba universe is a fascinating prospect, an exploration of the relationship between the colonizers and the Yoruba is more relevant to the topic of change and traditional society. Also, the issue simply has not received as much attention as it deserves. It is interesting that most critics—perhaps overly conscious of Soyinka's wishes—have concentrated their discussions on the threnodic essence of the play and have paid little more than perfunctory atten-
tion to the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized in the play. James Gibbs stands out as one of the few critics, if not the only one, who has challenged the idea that Soyinka's interpretation is necessarily the right one:

Soyinka's concern that *Horseman* should not be turned into yet another drama about clash of cultures has a certain validity and deserves some respect. But given the exigencies of production—and the text itself—one wonders whether a slippery substance like 'threnodic essence' is the central issue and how far it can be conveyed. . . . The Author's Note cannot ensure that the play will be given what the playwright considers an appropriate interpretation, nor should it. Legal protection is more likely to guarantee that the playwright's will be done.³

Gibbs is right in asserting that a playwright's interpretation of his play is not necessarily the correct nor the only possible interpretation. On the other hand, his reluctance to accept that the threnodic essence is the central issue simply because he considers it a "slippery substance" threatens to qualify him for acceptance into what the Ghanian novelist and critic Ayi Kwei Armah calls The Lazy School of Literary Criticism.⁴ It has already been acceded that the threnodic essence is the central issue in the play so Gibbs' statement has not been introduced to initiate a debate on the matter. Rather, it serves to illustrate that the clash of cultures, or, more aptly, the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized in the play—which Gibbs seems to imply might be the real central issue—is at least a very significant aspect of the play.
It is rather surprising, therefore, that most critics have apparently been reluctant to accede that this relationship constitutes a major theme in the play and have not examined it as seriously and as thoroughly as it deserves.

African writers have written extensively about the colonial experience. Chinua Achebe of Nigeria's *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958) and *Arrow of God* (London: Heinemann, 1964), Sembene Ousmane of Senegal's *God's Bits of Wood* (London: Heinemann, 1962), and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (then James Ngugi) of Kenya's *A Grain of Wheat* (London: Heinemann, 1967) are examples of novels which depict traditional African communities and their relationships with the colonizers. While Ngugi and Ousmane have tended to concentrate on the socio-political aspects of this relationship, Achebe has been more concerned with the socio-cultural aspect.

Why has this subject been treated so extensively and from so many angles, and why does it feature so prominently, as will be illustrated, in a play like *Death and the King's Horseman* in which the main focus is on a metaphysical test of transition? One of the answers must be that African writers, including Soyinka, are responding to a need they and other Africans feel to remember the colonial experience. This need to remember the period of colonization is apparently not exclusive to Africans. In his review of the Uruguayan author Eduardó Galeano's *Memory of Fire* vol II: *Faces and Masks*, Graeme Gibson observes:
One of the differences between ex-colonies and imperial powers must be that the former needs to remember and the latter to forget.

The Kenyan critic Ime Ikeddeh in his foreword to Ngugi's collection of essays entitled *Homecoming* makes an emphatic statement which can be said to justify not only existing but future works which treat Africa's colonial experience and the analysis of such works:

"...there can be no end to the discussion of the African encounter with Europe, because the wounds inflicted touched the very springs of life and have remained unhealed because they are constantly being gashed open again and again with more subtle, more lethal weapons."

It is significant that Ikeddeh refers to "the African encounter with Europe," a phrase which unites the era of slavery, the colonial era, and the post-independence or neo-colonial era as interconnected parts of a continuum. Seen from this perspective, the colonial period becomes not merely a past era but a phase in a long and on-going relationship between Africa and Europe. This perspective lends a new, dynamic and utilitarian value to works that deal with the colonial era. They become more than works which bring the past to life, though this in itself is a valuable exercise. Through their portrayal of the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized, they illustrate how and why Africans succeeded or failed to cope with European imperialism. This in turn can help contemporary Africans to better understand and to come to terms with their colonial heritage. It could also provide them with
clues about how to handle the on-going relationship between Africa and a western world that continues to influence African societies and their cultures. Although Ikeddeh does not state this specifically, it is almost certain that it is the utilitarian potential of works that deal with the African encounter with Europe that fuels his enthusiasm for further discussion of this relationship. To extend his metaphor, it is much more likely that he sees such discussion acting as a balm for the wounds of the past and as a spear and shield to protect and fight back against the more subtle, more lethal, weapons of today than as a platform on which Africa's wounds of yesterday and today can be displayed and lamented over perpetually.

Like Ousmane's *God's Bits of Woods*, which deals with a 1947-1948 railway strike in Senegal, and Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*, which deals with the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya, Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* is a fictionalized account of a specific slice of his country's colonial past:

> This play is based on events which took place in Oyo, ancient Yoruba city of Nigeria in 1946. That year, the lives of Elesin (Olori Elesin), his son, and the Colonial District Officer intertwined with the disastrous results set out in the play. The changes I have made are in matters of detail, sequence and of course characterization. The action has also been set back two or three years to while the war was still on, for minor reasons of dramaturgy.\(^7\)

In this extract, Soyinka makes it clear that he is using artistic licence in altering certain aspects of the original story. The basic facts that constitute the essence of the
story—the intertwining of the lives of the District Officer, Elesin and Elesin's son, and the tragedy that ensues—remain unchanged. The Alafin (Yoruba king) had died and custom demanded that the king's Chief Horseman, Elesin, "commit suicide" in order to accompany the king into the realm of the ancestors. When the District Officer gets wind of Elesin's impending suicide, he has him arrested to prevent what he considers a barbaric waste of human life. Elesin's son, Olunde, had returned from overseas to bury his father as soon as he heard of the Alafin's death. He knew Elesin would have to die "the Death of Death" soon after the king's death. When Elesin fails to fulfill his destiny, Olunde kills himself. After his son's death Elesin commits suicide in disgrace.

Simon Pilkings (the British Colonial District Officer), Elesin (the Yoruba Oba and King's Horseman), and Olunde (who apparently has one foot in each world since he is Elesin's son and heir to the position of King's Horseman but has been studying medicine in England) are representative of the three basic groups into which all the other characters fit. With Pilkings in the British colonial group are his wife, Jane Pilkings, the Resident, the Aide-De-Camp, the Prince and the Dancers at the ball. With Elesin in the traditional Yoruba group are Iyaloja, the Praise Singer, the Bride and the Village Women. In the third group with Olunde are the other Yoruba characters, Amusa, Joseph and the Young Girls,
who have been influenced, to varying degrees, by the British colonialists' culture.

The first two groups, the British colonialists and the traditional Yoruba, are so entrenched in their diverse cultures that they can be said to constitute opposing camps. While each of these two groups is a close-knit unit whose members share a common culture, the third group consists of characters who do not necessarily interact with each other and who only share the fact that they have been influenced by western culture. In fact, each of them leans so far towards one or the other of the first two groups that all the characters in the play could be said to belong either to the British camp or to the Yoruba camp. Although these two camps manage to co-exist there is an underlying tension in their relationship with each other that erupts into a number of confrontations when Pilkings decides to have Elesin arrested.

The fact that the whole cast could be divided into two camps—the British colonial camp being one—indicates that the Colonial Factor plays a far larger role in the play than Soyinka's Author's Note suggests. The play's structure provides another indication of the Colonial Factor's significance. Soyinka consistently avoids using the traditional dramatic labels for sections of a play, that is, Acts and Scenes, in his drama. Death and the King's Horseman is divided into five parts labelled simply 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.
1 takes place in the Yoruba market, 2 in the District Officer's bungalow, 3 in the market, 4 in the hall of the Residency, and 5 in a cellar of the Residency. The alternation of scene setting between the territory of the Yoruba (the market) and that of the colonialists (the District Officer's bungalow and the Residency) reinforces the idea that there are two separate camps in the play and suggests that both camps are important.

While the plot supports the assertions that there are two camps in the play and that the colonial camp is important, it also illustrates the fact that the play's main concern is with the affairs of the Yoruba. 1 deals with Elesin's preparation for his death, his witty, eloquent and persuasive argument to be allowed to marry a young girl who had caught his eye, and the acquiescent granting of this last wish by Iyaloj and the other women. In short, the first part deals exclusively with the Yoruba and their concerns. 2 deals with Simon and Jane Pilkings' preparation for the ball and with what for them is the distracting news that some significant, perhaps disturbing incident--they are not sure whether it is a wedding, a ritual murder or a suicide--is afoot in the native community. The Pilkings spend almost the entire scene discussing the Yoruba and the impending incident. The first half of 3 treats a confrontation between Sergeant Amusa, a representative of the colonial camp, who has been ordered to arrest Elesin and the
market women who are intent on barring him from entering Elesin's bridal hut. The second half is devoted to Elesin's performance of the Dance of Death. Essentially, 4 treats the confrontation between Olunde and Jane Pilkins. 5 brings together the primary characters of each camp for a final confrontation.

The first two parts, then, serve to introduce the two camps and the last three depict a series of confrontations between them. This supports the argument that both camps are important. However, while the Yoruba are concerned exclusively with their affairs in 1, the colonialists spend almost all of 2 discussing, not the ball, but the Yoruba and their affairs. Also, only half of 3 is devoted to the confrontation between the camps; the second half deals exclusively with the Yoruba. In fact, except for the brief periods in 2 when the Pilkins discuss the ball and in 4 when the ball opens with dancing, all the depictions in the play are of the Yoruba's activities, and all the discussions and all the confrontations about the Yoruba's affairs. Interestingly, therefore, the structure and the plot demonstrate the significance of the Colonial Factor while illustrating the fact that Soyinka's main concern is with the affairs of the Yoruba.

The Pilkins are significant not as individual characters but as representatives of British colonialism. It is through them, especially through Simon Pilkins, that
Soyinka reflects official British colonial policy and illustrates the attitudes and standpoints of British colonialists in general. His alien social and cultural background combined with the political power he wields make Simon Pilkings the most obvious candidate for the role of reformer of Yoruba society in the play. An examination of his attitude to and discourse with the Yoruba will reveal the extent to which he could be considered a force of change.

Essentially, the colonialist only interferes in the affairs of the Yoruba on three occasions—when he sends Olunde off to medical school in spite of Elesin's disapproval, when he arrests the Egungun, and when he arrests Elesin. In all three cases he is convinced he is doing the right thing. The following conversation between him and his wife illustrates this:

PILKINGS: Don't you remember? He's that chief with whom I had a scrap some three or four years ago. I helped his son get to a medical school in England, remember? He fought tooth and nail to prevent it.

JANE: Oh now I remember. He was that very sensitive young man. What was his name again?

PILKINGS: Olunde. Haven't replied to his last letter come to think of it. The old pagan wanted him to stay and carry on some family tradition or the other. Honestly I couldn't understand the fuss he made. I literally had to help the boy escape from close confinement and load him onto the next boat. A most intelligent boy, really bright.

JANE: I rather thought he was much too sensitive you know. The kind of person you feel should be a
Pilkins is clearly convinced that he acted in Olunde's best interest when he helped send him off to England since he was helping the young man to fulfill his ambition of becoming a doctor and saving him from wasting his life carrying on "some family tradition or other." The Pilkins' good intentions, combined with their casual references to Olunde's intelligence and his sensitivity, suggest that they are basically decent, helpful and liberal in their dealings with Olunde. However, the extract also reveals another side to the couple's relationship with the Yoruba community in general. It is significant that Pilkins does not know what tradition Olunde is supposed to have stayed home to carry on nor why Elesin was so upset over the idea of Olunde leaving the community. Also, he is blissfully unaware that Elesin is to commit suicide that very evening until he is informed by Amusa, the Yoruba Native Administration policeman.

What all of this adds up to is an aloofness on both a physical and a social level. This aloofness was in fact a characteristic of the official British system of Indirect Rule. The following extract from Michael Crowder's *West Africa Under Colonial Rule* describes the circumstances in which the typical British colonial administrator lived in West Africa:
The British administrator kept aloof from the people he was meant to be protecting. He was like a headmaster of a public school who left discipline of the boys to the Senior Prefect and only interfered with it if abuse of power became too flagrant or if there was no suitable person to appoint as Prefect. This aloofness was the dominant characteristic of British colonial administration. . . . The administrator, his bungalow carefully sited well away from the 'native' town, on top of a hill, or a hummock, if that was all the local geography provided, hauled up the Union Jack at 6 p.m., and, pink gin in hand, recreated [an] upper deck on dry land.**

Soyinka has definitely cast Pilkings in the mould of the typical British colonial administrator. He is physically removed from the Yoruba in his bungalow on the hill, and socially distant from them since he interacts only with the other colonialists, together with whom he attempts to recreate English society in Yorubaland.

Pilkings does not seem to know what is going on in the Yoruba community nor to understand the Yoruba and their culture. His ignorance about the Yoruba is apparent in the ridiculously sweeping and contradictory generalizations he makes about them:

PILKINGS (thoughtfully): No, I don't think he knew. At least he gave no indication. But you couldn't really tell with him. He was rather close you know, quite unlike most of them. Didn't give much away, not even to me.

JANE: Aren't they all rather close, Simon?

PILKINGS: These natives here? Good gracious. They'll open their mouths and yap with you about their family secrets before you can stop them. Only the other day. . .

JANE: But Simon, do they really give anything away? I mean, anything that really counts. This
affair for instance, we didn't know they still practised that custom did we?

PILKINGS: Ye-e-es, I suppose you're right there. Sly, devious bastards. (p. 29)

One moment the District Officer, who obviously considers himself a man who knows his natives, declares emphatically that the Yoruba are extremely open and talkative and the next he declares, equally emphatically, that they are "sly, devious bastards." He gives further proof of his ignorance of the Yoruba and their customs when he tries to use a Yoruba proverb to justify his action in saving Elesin's life:

PILKINGS: I wish to ask you to search the quiet of your heart and tell me--do you not find great contradictions in the wisdom of your own race?

ELESIN: Make yourself clear, white one.

PILKINGS: I have lived among you long enough to learn a saying or two. One came to my mind tonight when I stepped into the market and saw what was going on. You were surrounded by those who egged you on with song and praises. I thought, are these not the same people who say: the elder grimly approaches heaven and you ask him to bear your greeting yonder; do you think he makes the journey willingly? After that, I did not hesitate. (p. 64)

The elder's grimness in the proverb has to do not so much with a reluctance to leave this world but with his uncertainty about the kind of reception he will get from the ancestors. Since Elesin is guaranteed a favourable reception if he dies the Death of Death, the message of the proverb does not apply to his situation. As David Richards
points out in his article, "Owe l'esin oro: Proverbs Like Horses: Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman":

Pilkings' misapplication of the proverb in this case only adds an ironic coloring to the greater incomprehension of the Yoruba culture by the Imperialist. . .12*

The Pilkings share an irreverence for traditional Yoruba religion, and Simon Pilkings in particular displays an insensitive disregard for the sensibilities of anyone who respects the norms of that religion. Pilkings' arrest of the Egungun compounded with the couple's decision to wear the Egungun dress as fancy dress costumes and Pilkings' impatient and undiplomatic handling of Amusa's disapproval of their costumes illustrate this:

AMUSA (stammers badly and points a shaky finger at his dress): Mista Pirinkin. . .Mista Pirinkin. . .

PILKINGS: What is the matter with you?

JANE (emerging): Who is it dear? Oh, Amusa. . .

PILKINGS: Yes it's Amusa, and acting most strangely.

AMUSA (his attention now transferred to Mrs. Pilkings): Mammadam. . .you too!

PILKINGS: What the hell is the matter with you man!

JANE: Your costume darling. Our fancy dress.

PILKINGS: Oh hell, I'd forgotten all about that. (lifts the face of the mask over his head showing his face. His wife follows suit.)

JANE: I think you've shocked his pagan heart bless him.

PILKINGS: Nonsense, he's a Moslem. Come on Amusa, you don't believe in all this nonsense do
you? I thought you were a good Moslem.

AMUSA: Mista Pirinkin, I beg you sir, what you think you do with that dress? It belong to dead cult, not for human being.

PILKINGS: Oh, Amusa, what a let down you are. I swear by you at the club you know--thank God for Amusa, he doesn't believe in any mumbo-jumbo. And now look at you!

AMUSA: Mista Pirinkin, I beg you, take it off. Is not good for man like you to touch that cloth.

PILKINGS: Well, I've got it on. And what's more Jane and I have bet on it we're taking first prize at the ball... (p. 24)

It is obvious from Simon's disappointment in Amusa and Jane's reference to his "pagan heart" that for the Pilkings traditional Yoruba religion is nothing more than mere superstition, only so much "mumbo-jumbo." Of course, they cannot be expected to share the Yoruba's religious beliefs, but the arrest of the Egungun and the decision to use the Egungun vestments as fancy dress costumes amounts to much more than irreverent tactlessness on their part.

The Pilkings' appearance in Egungun vestments makes for a dramatic entrance. Any audience would be intrigued by their costumes but an audience familiar with the Egungun cult would be astounded. Such an audience would be particularly scandalized at the idea of the Egungun vestments being used as a fancy dress costume. Soyinka uses Amusa's reaction--he is thoroughly shocked even though he is a Moslem--to give the audience that is unfamiliar with the
Egungun cult an indication of how scandalous the Pilkings' actions are to the informed audience and to the Yoruba community in the play. It is necessary to have some knowledge of the role the Egungun cult plays in traditional Yoruba society and the awe in which the Egungun figure is held to fully appreciate the Yoruba perspective of the Pilkings' actions.

The word Egungun can be used to refer both to the cult and the cult's masked figures. Egungun is an exclusive, male cult whose members deal primarily with matters pertaining to the worship and appeasement of the dead. The Egungun (masked figure) is believed to be the embodiment of, or at least representative of a particular dead individual. Each Egungun is the exact height and figure of the deceased person it is supposed to represent and is covered from head to foot with cloths which are as similar as possible to those in which the deceased was buried. According to the Yoruba historian, Samuel Johnson, it is considered a crime to touch an Egungun in public and disrespectful to pass it by with one's head uncovered. Egunguns are believed to listen to and put right the complaints of the living, bless them with human and crop fertility and also with general prosperity.

When Pilkings arrests the Egungun figure he is in effect treating the embodiment of a revered Yoruba ancestor as a common criminal. When they put on the Egungun vest-
ments, the Pilkings are not only breaking the taboo which forbids the uninitiated to touch the Egungun dress, they are also desecrating the garments of the Yoruba ancestors and presuming to take the place of the spirits of these ancestors which are considered to inhabit the dress. By treating the Egungun vestments as fancy dress costumes they are reducing sacred and revered religious symbols to exotic, curious clothing. In short, the Pilkings are making a mockery of Yoruba religion but remain too ignorant to fully appreciate this and too insensitive to the Yoruba's sensibilities and religious beliefs to stop.

Pilkings is equally irreverent and insensitive in his dealings with Yoruba figures of authority. This attitude is reflected in his decision to have Elesin arrested. According to Mark Ralph-Bowman, Pilkings arrests Elesin because "he feels that a ritual suicide by a major figure in the local hierarchy during the Prince's visit would not enhance his career prospects in the colonial service." While it is possible that this might have been Pilkings' ultimate concern, it remains true that his initial decision to arrest Elesin was based on far less defensible reasons:

JANE: Oh. Does it mean we are not getting to the ball at all?

PILKINGS: No-o. I'll have the man arrested. Everyone remotely involved. In any case there may be nothing to it. Just rumours.

(p. 26)

It is apparent from the extract that Pilkings' immediate
Pilkings' attitude is, in fact, characteristic of the typical British colonial administrator who had little respect for traditional figures of authority even though he governed through them. Samuel Johnson's indignant footnote to a letter from an Acting-Governor to warring Alafins in colonial Yorubaland illustrates this:

Governor Evans' letter seems very remarkable in its own way. To us it reads like an admonition to a number of truant schoolboys rather than an address to commanders of about half a million men who for over ten years had been engaged in a death struggle with one another. . . "Go home to your villages," says the Governor, "and make your women glad," etc. Those villages are towns with 50,000 to 250,000 souls! And is there any reason why their "women" should be denied the right and dignity of being termed their wives?

Men who control such huge masses of humanity, capacities which can guide, control, and direct all the intricacies of municipal and political machineries of a government, . . . might at least be considered as possessing some serious qualities beyond those of children, as they appear to be regarded, and deserving some honourable consideration due to men although they be Negroes.  

The Acting-Governor's failure to give the traditionally powerful Alafin "Some honourable consideration" and his
tendency to treat the affairs of the Yoruba lightly is reflected on a smaller scale in Pilking's decision to arrest Elesin on the basis of a rumour so he and his wife would not miss a fancy-dress ball. This underscores the assertion that in Pilking, Soyinka has re-created the typical British colonial administrator.

It is significant that only three instances in which Pilking interfered in the affairs of the Yoruba are mentioned in the play and that there is a considerable time span between the incidents; the first, involving Olunde, had taken place three or four years previously, and the second, involving the Egungun, one month previously. Because these two incidents occurred in the past and are only mentioned in passing by the characters they establish a precedent of colonialist interference without diverting the audience's attention from the third and most significant incident—Pilking's interruption of Elesin's Dance of Death. The low number of incidents of colonialist interference over a considerable time-span is in keeping with Indirect Rule, the British colonial system of local government which involved the preservation of traditional African cultural and political institutions. Michael Crowder points out that the colonial administrator was required to rule through the traditional institutions of government and to interfere only to modify those aspects of government that proved to be repugnant to European ideas of what constituted good
government and to ensure the achievement of the main purpose of colonial rule, the exploitation of the colonized country. It is not surprising that Pilkings, for the most part, allows the Yoruba to handle their own affairs. At best, he represents an incidental and reluctant force of change.

Because of his lack of understanding of the Yoruba and his irreverence for their cultural, political and religious systems and values, Pilkings' actions have far-reaching, potentially disastrous consequences in the few instances when he does interfere in Yoruba affairs. The arrest of the Egungun and the breaking of the Yoruba taboo surrounding the Egungun, for example, could easily have brought about an ugly confrontation between Pilkings and the Yoruba. In fact, Iyaloja declares that the tragic deaths in the play are at least partly attributable to the Pilkings' desecration of the Egungun dress:

IYALOJA: No child, it is what you brought to be, you who play with strangers' lives, who even usurp the vestments of our dead, yet believe that the stain of death will not cling to you.

(p. 76)

For Iyaloja and the other Yoruba, Pilkings' desecration of the Egungun vestments meant that a disastrous consequence of some kind was inevitable. Iyaloja believes, therefore, that the Elesin and Olunde's deaths, resulting as they do from Pilkings' interference, are that feared but inevitable consequence.
Yoruba taboos aside, it was still virtually inevitable that Pilkings' interference would cause a disaster of some kind. The basic problem is that he draws only on the values of his society when making decisions concerning the Yoruba. Because he judges every situation from a purely Eurocentric perspective he sees suicide as a tragic waste of human life and the custom that requires a man to commit suicide as cruel and barbaric. It is little wonder, then, that he feels obligated to stop Elesin's suicide.

What Pilkings fails to understand is that Elesin is not supposed to commit suicide, but rather, to die the Yoruba Death of Death. Although both involve the individual taking his own life, there is a vast difference between suicide and the Death of Death. Anyone can simply commit suicide, but only one man, the King's Horseman, is capable of undertaking the ritual Death of Death:

IYALOJA: It takes an Elesin to die the death of death
Only Elesin . . . dies the unknowable death of death . . .

(p. 43)

He accomplishes the act by simply willing himself to die while performing the Dance of Death. The exclusivity and the ritual associated with the act and the virtually superhuman willpower required to execute it make the Death of Death quite distinct from a normal suicide.

Secondly, people usually commit suicide out of desolation or desperation and their deaths are usually a cause for grief. Elesin, however, is in a celebratory mood as he
prepares for his death. The play opens with him striding through the market, singing and dancing with infectious enjoyment. He is pursued by drummers and praise-singers who, joined by the market women, engage him in jovial banter and exchange of witty sayings. Elesin appears positively eager to face death:

ELESIN: . . . You all know
What I am.

PRAISE-SINGER:
That rock which turns its open lodes
Into the path of lightning. A gay
Thoroughbred whose stride disdains
To falter though an adder reared
Suddenly in his path.

ELESIN: My rein is loosened.
I am master of my fate. When the hour comes
Watch me dance along the narrowing path
Glazed by the soles of my great precursors.
My soul is eager. I shall not turn aside.

(p. 14)

In contrast with a potential suicide, Elesin is vibrant, even boastful, and he approaches death with joy and eagerness.

Elesin's and the other Yorubas' celebration of his impending death appears bizarre until one understands what the Horseman's death is supposed to accomplish. On a personal level Elesin is eager to rejoin the Alafin who was not only his master but his closest friend:

WOMEN: You will not delay?

ELESIN: Where the storm pleases, and when, it directs
The Giants of the forest. When friendship
summons
Is when the true comrade goes.
WOMEN: Nothing will hold you back?

ELESIN: Nothing. What! Has no one told you yet? I go to keep my friend and master company. Who says the mouth does not believe in 'No, I have chewed all that before?' I say I have. . . .

Life has an end. A life that will outlive Fame and friendship begs another name. . . . Life is honour

It ends when honour ends. (pp. 14-15)

Tradition requires that he die to accompany the Alafin to the realm of the ancestors. For him to shirk this responsibility by continuing to live would be dishonourable and he believes a dishonourable life is not worth living. Apart from the fact that it is his duty to die, Elesin considers it the ultimate proof of his loyalty to his best friend and master, whom he seems to be genuinely eager to rejoin. And anyway, he can die contented since he has led a luxurious and voluptuous life. Thus, for Elesin, his death is a means of making a dignified, awe-inspiring exit from the world, ensuring a favourable reception for himself in the world of the ancestors, fulfilling his last duty as King's Horseman, and becoming reunited with his best friend.

Elesin's death is, in fact, necessary to ensure the very survival of the Yoruba universe. The Yoruba universe is self-contained and encompasses three linked stages—the world of the living, the dead and the unborn.7 Deceased Yoruba are believed to undergo a transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead. Their tradition maintains the link between the three stages. Apparently,
the Alafin "waits" after his death so that he can undergo this transition accompanied by his Chief Horseman. In the following speech in which Iyaloja talks about Elesin's abortive attempt to die the Death of Death, she reveals that keeping the dead Alafin waiting could have disastrous consequences:

IYALOJA: He knows the meaning of a king's passage; he was not born yesterday. He knows the peril to the race when our dead father, who goes as intermediary, waits and waits and knows he is betrayed. He knows when the narrow gate was opened and he knows it will not stay for laggards who drag their feet in dung and vomit, whose lips are reeking of the left-overs of lesser men. He knows he has condemned our king to wander in the void of evil with beings who are enemies of life.

(p. 71)

The passage between the two worlds is open only for a specific period, and if the king is still waiting after it closes he will be left suspended in a limbo between the world of the dead and that of the living. Furthermore, his failure to reach the realm of the dead would mean that the link between the two worlds would have been broken. The Yoruba universe would be plunged into chaos as a result and the world of the living, which is directed to a large extent by the world of the dead, would be most severely affected. All this could be brought about if Elesin fails to die the Death of Death. The fate of the Yoruba world is, as the Praise-Singer declares, in Elesin's hands.

The Praise-Singer warns the self-assured Elesin of his awesome responsibility in the following extract:
ELESIN: . . . I go to meet my great forebears.

PRAISE-SINGER: In their time the world was never tilted from its groove, it shall not be in yours.

ELESIN: The gods have said No.

PRAISE-SINGER: In their time the great wars came and went, the little wars came and went; the white slavers came and went, they took away the heart of our race, they bore away the mind and muscle of our race. The city fell and was rebuilt; the city fell and our people trudged through mountain and forest to found a new home but—Elesin Oba do you hear me?

ELESIN: I hear your voice Oloun-yo.

PRAISE-SINGER: There is only one home to the life of a river-mussel; there is only one home to the life of a tortoise; there is only one shell to the soul of man; 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?

ELESIN: It did not in the time of my forebears, it shall not in mine.

(pp. 10-11)

The repetitions the Praise-Singer employs lend a rhythmic quality to his speeches that is characteristic of the formalized language used in Yoruba ritual.8 The long statement and short reply format reinforces the ritualistic atmosphere. The whole sequence is in fact a ritual designed to elicit a re-affirmation from Elesin of his readiness to die and to warn him of the disaster that could result if he failed to carry out the required act. The Praise-Singer's last speech emphasizes the fact that the Yoruba universe is self-contained and irreplaceable. In his second speech he asserts that the Yoruba have survived everything from wars
to slavery, from displacement to aggression, only because the link between the three stages of the Yoruba universe remained intact.

As Iyaloja points out, the dead Alafin becomes the intermediary between the living and the dead when he enters the world of the dead. If he is accompanied by his best friend and Chief Horseman, he would be happy in the world of the ancestors and much more inclined to bestow blessings on the living and intercede in their favour with the other ancestors. The townspeople are, therefore, in a celebratory mood in anticipation of the blessings that will be showered on them when the Alafin, accompanied by Elesin, reaches the world of the dead.

Thus, by dying the Death of Death, Elesin will preserve his honour, fulfill his destiny, and be re-united with his best friend. More significantly, his death will prevent the Alafin's spirit from being lost in limbo, ensure that the living are looked favourably upon by the ancestors and prevent the all important link between the living and the dead from being broken. To the Yoruba, Elesin's death is necessary not only to ensure the well-being of the community but also to prevent the entire Yoruba universe from being thrown into chaos.

Pilkings is unaware of the differences between suicide and the Death of Death and, therefore, does not understand that the Yoruba believe that the very survival of their
entire universe depends on Elesin accomplishing the Death of Death. He steps in while Elesin is performing the Dance of Death and arrests him, presumably to save his life. When Olunde, who understands what is at stake, is informed of this he kills himself so as to take his father's place beside the Alafin on the journey to the world of the dead. Elesin then kills himself in disgrace. Thus, instead of saving one life, Pilkings, through his interference in a tradition he does not understand, inadvertently causes two deaths. Technically, he is also responsible for what the Yoruba perceive as their precarious future. Interestingly, however, the Yoruba do not blame him for this.

As the following extract reveals, the Yoruba acknowledge Pilkings' role in bringing about their predicament, yet place the blame squarely on Elesin's shoulders:

PRAISE-SINGER: Elesin, we placed the reins of the world in your hands yet you watched it plunge over the edge of the bitter precipice. You sat with folded arms while evil strangers tilted the world from its course and crashed it beyond the edge of emptiness—you muttered, there is little that one man can do, you left us floundering in a blind future.

The Yoruba have two reasons for taking this position. Firstly, they realize that Elesin is largely to blame for his failure to die the Death of Death. Secondly, they are too contemptuous of Pilkings, because of his ignorance about their culture and their values, to seriously consider him to be culpable. In the following extract, Elesin tries to
blame everyone for his failure: from his bride, whose attractiveness made him become preoccupied with sex, to Iyaloja, who allowed him to get married on the day he was supposed to die, to Pilkings, who actually interrupted his dance:

ELESIN: I need neither your pity nor the pity of the world. I need understanding. Even I need to understand. You were present at my defeat. You were part of the beginnings. You brought about the renewal of my tie to earth, you helped in the binding of the cord.

IYALOJA: I gave you warning. The river which fills up before our eyes does not sweep us along in its flood.

ELESIN: What were warnings beside the moist contact of living earth between my fingers? What were warnings beside the renewal of famished embers lodged eternally in the heart of man. But even that, even if it overwhelmed one with a thousand-fold temptations to linger a little while, a man could overcome it. It is when the alien hand pollutes to source of will, when a stranger force of violence shatters the mind's calm resolution, this is when a man is made to commit the awful treachery of relief. ... My will was squelched in the spittle of an alien race, and all because I had committed this blasphemy of thought—that there might be the hand of the gods in a stranger's intervention.

IYAJOLA: Explain it how you will, I hope it brings you peace of mind. The bush-rat fled his rightful cause, reached the market and set up a lamentation. 'Please save me!'—are these fitting words to hear from an ancestral mask? 'There's a wild beast at my heels' is not becoming language from a hunter.

(p. 69)

Here Iyaloja employs the traditional method of using allusions to deliver a rebuke. Through her references to the bush-rat, the ancestral mask and the hunter, Iyaloja
alludes to and illustrates the absurdity of Elesin's failure to perform his duty. The ancestral mask (Egungun) is supposed to save people not ask to be saved and the hunter is supposed to face wild beasts not run from them. Elesin in turn is supposed to die the Death of Death not shy away from it and then ask to be understood for doing so. Elesin confesses that he became reluctant to die even before Pilkings interrupted his dance. To the Yoruba, Elesin's failure is inexcusable for several reasons. Firstly, he had been pampered all his life so that if he had to die the Death of Death he would die content. Secondly, he had been cautioned repeatedly by both the Praise-Singer and Iyaloja about the danger in getting married and enjoying a honeymoon on the very day he was supposed to die. Thirdly, tradition provided a means for the Horseman to opt out of making the ultimate sacrifice without plunging the universe into chaos:

PRAISE-SINGER: Elesin Oba! I call you by that name only this last time. Remember when I said, if you cannot come, tell my horse. (Pause.) What? I cannot hear you? I said, if you cannot come, whisper in the ears of my horse. . . . I said at the last, if evil hands hold you back, just tell my horse there is weight on the helm of your smock. I dare not wait too long.

(p. 74)

After the salutation, the Praise-Singer assumes the character of the dead Alafin and rebukes Elesin for his failure. If for any reason, including being held back by "evil hands" as Elesin was, the Horseman could not die the Death of Death, he could simply whisper his excuses into the ears of
the corpse of the Alafin's horse, and it would bear the message to the Alafin, who would then proceed to the world of the dead without him.

Despite the Yoruba's position, the objective observer reaches the conclusion that Pilkings is culpable. Elesin stresses that he could have overcome his temptation to stay alive. It was Pilkings' interruption that polluted "the source of [his] will." Even if one dismisses Elesin's explanation as an excuse, the fact remains that Pilkings forcibly interrupted the dance and arrested Elesin. The question of whether or not the Horseman had enough resolve to accomplish the Death of Death became irrelevant at that point since it was impossible for him to continue his execution of the dance or concentrate on his efforts to make the mysterious transition.

It has already been mentioned that unlike the colonials who spend so much time discussing "the natives" the Yoruba concern themselves only with their own affairs. As a result, they do not offer the audience many illustrations of their opinion of and attitude toward the colonialists. However, on the two occasions when Pilkings' interference in their affairs leads to a confrontation between them and the colonial administration, the Yoruba make their feelings about the colonialists and their administration clear.

The first such situation occurs when Pilkings orders Elesin arrested. The market women prevent the arresting
officers, Sergeant Amusa and his constable, from performing their duty by barring them from Elesein's bridal hut. They then proceed to tease the policemen mercilessly, calling their manhood into question, peeping under their baggy regulation shorts, et cetera. The young girls quickly join in and proceed to knock off the officers' hats and seize their batons. They even threaten to remove the policemen's shorts. Thus, the womenfolk express the Yorubas' contempt for the colonial administration by humiliating the Native Administration policemen. The girls, who are educated, then affect English accents to play the role of Englishmen:

GIRLS: -Sorry, I didn't catch your name.
-May I take your hat?
-If you insist. May I take yours? (Exchanging policeman's hats.)
-How very kind of you... .
-And how do you find the place?
-The natives are alright.
-Friendly?
-Tractable.
-Not a teeny-weeny bit restless?
-Well, a teeny-weeny bit restless.
-One might even say, difficult?
-Indeed, one might be tempted to say, difficult.

(p. 38)

Through their play-acting the girls poke fun at the British colonialists' drawing-room manners, their inability to understand the Yoruba, their relatively superficial preoccupations, and their attempts to recreate British society in Yorubaland. In this scene in which Yoruba girls in a Yoruba marketplace pretend to be Englishmen to entertain their mothers and themselves, Soyinka captures and conveys to the
audience the Yorubas' perception of the colonialists as staid, hypocritically polite, superficial, and ridiculously out-of-place aliens. Thus, instead of alienating the girls from their culture and their people, western education has only provided them with a tool with which to deride the colonialists and their culture. They are, therefore, definitely not a force of change in the play.

The second situation in which the Yoruba reveal their attitude toward the colonialists is when Elesin and Iyaloja address Pilkings after Elesin's arrest. The fact that the angry and despondent Elesin repeatedly addresses Pilkings as "white man," "white one" and "ghostly one" indicates that these terms carry a derogatory connotation. Iyaloja expresses her impatience with and contempt for Pilkings by addressing him not only as "white one" but as "child" also.

The Yoruba's attitude to colonial laws is reflected in the following exchange between Amusa and the market women:

WOMAN: You ignorant man. It is not he who calls himself Elesin Oba, it is his blood that says it. As it called out to his father before him and will to his son after him. And that is in spite of everything your white man can do. . . .

AMUSA: The government say dat kin'ting must stop.

WOMAN: Who will stop it? You? Tonight our husband and father will prove himself greater than the laws of strangers. (pp. 35-36)

From the woman's first speech, it would appear that King's Horseman is not only a hereditary title handed down from father to son, but virtually a hereditary trait. Thus, the
King's Horseman cannot help but be King's Horseman no matter what laws the colonialists pass. Her last speech illustrates the Yoruba's confidence that their culture can resist the force of any alien law designed to alter it. The Yoruba are, therefore, contemptuous of the colonialists and their culture. Consequently, they are disrespectful of all figures of colonial authority from the District Officer to the policemen, especially when the colonialists interfere in their affairs.

Joseph and Amusa seem to exist in a social and cultural limbo. Joseph, who is a Christian and works for Pilkings, is alienated from the Yoruba community. This is revealed when he proves to be as ignorant of Elesin's impending death as Pilkings. Because Amusa works for the colonial administration, the Yoruba regard him as nothing more than a lackey of the colonialists. In the scene in which the girls make fun of the colonialists, Amusa inadvertently reveals that he is indeed a "yes-man" when he snaps to attention and replies "Yessir!" when one of the girls bellows out his name in an English accent. The Yoruba do not interact with Joseph and they make their contempt for Amusa clear. Pilkings does not have much respect for them either so they are held in contempt by both camps. Thus, their associations with the colonialists and their culture has only weakened Joseph and Amusa's Yoruba identity and estranged them from their people.
Soyinka's stance in *Death and the King's Horseman* is pro-traditionalist. It is unlikely that he endorses the colonialists' attempts to change Yoruba customs. Their inability and unwillingness to understand the Yoruba, which Soyinka illustrates repeatedly, mean they cannot introduce constructive changes which take the Yorubas' values into consideration. When they do take a stand against what they consider the Yorubas' more barbaric practices, they do a lot more harm than good. Elesin and Olunde's deaths and the Yorubas' uncertain future, all of which result from Pilkings' interference in Yoruba affairs, illustrate this.

In *Wole Soyinka and Modern Tragedy*, Ketu Katrak asserts that Soyinka criticizes the Death of Death tradition in the play:

> Although Elesin is condemned by the community, the dramatist captures his human plight, his fear before the frightening abyss. Soyinka is surely questioning this kind of heavy communal demand which requires a man to sacrifice his life for the sake of some unspecified benefit to the community. 10

Katrak's assertion suggests that Soyinka advocates the discontinuation of the tradition. However, only if one ignores the evidence in the play or dismisses Yoruba religion as superstition can one endorse Katrak's view. Elesin's death is not only supposed to bring "some unspecified benefit to the community" but also to save the entire Yoruba universe from being thrown into chaos. Soyinka does capture Elesin's human plight, and this adds to
the realism of the play and allows the audience to share
Elesin's personal anguish. However, it is unlikely that the
playwright intends to have the audience sympathize more with
Elesin's personal plight than with the entire Yoruba
community's. Secondly, Soyinka himself has commented on the
question of the morality of customs that require individuals
to sacrifice their lives:

I am not interested in whether the concept of
individual sacrifice is valid or not. . . I think
there is one principle, one essential morality of
African society which we must always bear in mind,
and that is that the greatest morality is what
makes the entire society survive. 23

It is unlikely that Soyinka is advocating a reformation of
the Death of Death tradition given that he takes no position
on the validity of traditions that demand individual
sacrifice. Elesin's death is apparently essential to the
survival of the Yoruba community so the custom that requires
his death is in keeping with African morality, which Soyinka
almost certainly identifies with.

Through Olunde's return to Yorubaland and, more
significantly, his sacrifice of his own life for the good of
the community, Soyinka illustrates the strength of tradi-
tion. Apart from Pilkings' observance of the British policy
of non-intervention Indirect Rule, it is because of their
faith in and adherence to their culture that the Yoruba
prove so resistant to change.
Through Olunde's exposition and defence of Yoruba values in his discussion with Jane Pilkings, and the girls' satirizing of the colonialists, Soyinka makes the point that education need not estrange the African from his culture. In fact, as these characters prove, it could be used to defend traditional values and to express disesteem of western ones.

Margaret Laurence points out in *Long Drums and Cannons* that Africa was interpreted and misinterpreted by outsiders for long enough. Africans, including Nigerians, are, therefore, engaged in reassessing their past, rediscovering their inheritance and interpreting themselves to their own people and to the rest of the world. This process includes the re-telling of Africa's history from an afrocentric perspective, or revisionist historiography, as it is being called by African historians. While scholarly history books, by their very nature, can only offer facts and figures on the page, *Death and the King's Horseman* brings African history to life onstage. It transports the audience back in time and affords them an account of colonial Yoruba history that they can see and hear.

One of the tasks of revisionist historiography is refuting the myths about the relationship between the colonizer and Africans popularized by Eurocentric historians. Because the Yoruba in the play disapprove so
strongly of Pilkings' interference in their affairs, and because they have only contempt for the District Officer and his administration, Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman helps to explode the myth, popularized by the colonialists in such works as W.N.M. Geary's Nigeria Under British Rule, that the Yoruba and other Africans approved of and welcomed colonial domination. As an Afrocentric dramatization of Yoruba history, Death and the King's Horseman is an addition to the body of creative African literature that examines African history in general and the colonial era in particular. By adhering to the facts of the original story, admitting to the few changes he made in his Author's Note, and making sure that even though they are flat, his colonialist characters' attitudes and actions reflect official British colonial policy, Soyinka ensures that the play is not only a significant work of literature but also a credible historical account.
Notes

1 Wole Soyinka, author's note, *Death and the King's Horseman* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1975) [5-6].

2 Soyinka, author's note, [5].


7 Wole Soyinka, author's note, [5].

8 The phrase "commit suicide" has been employed here for want of a better term. Critics have used such phrases as "commit suicide" and "die by ritual suicide" to describe the act Elesin is supposed to carry out. However, the negative suggestion of a sinful, wasteful death that the word "suicide" usually evokes makes these phrases quite inapt descriptions of the Yoruba Death of Death required of Elesin. The Death of Death concept will be explained and examined later in the chapter.

9 Soyinka employs a variety of labels for the division of his drama. In some plays, *The Swamp Dwellers* for example, all the action takes place in the same setting and no mention is made of scene changes. Other plays, like *A Dance of the Forests* and *The Road* are divided into Parts. There are usually two Parts to such plays. The divisions of *Death and the King's Horseman* are simply labelled 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. *The Lion and the Jewel* is divided into Morning, Afternoon, and Night.

10 Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1975) 28. All subsequent quotations from *Death and the King's Horseman* will be identified by page number.


17 Johnson, 539-540.

18 Crowder, 169.


20 Kofi Awoonor, *The Breast of the Earth: A Survey of the History, Culture and Literature of Africa South of the Sahara* (New York: Anchor Press, 1975) 92. This page includes a translated, traditional ijala prayer-poem dedicated to Ogun, the Yoruba god of Iron. The following extract from the prayer-poem illustrates how extensively repetition is used in formal, ritualized Yoruba:

Ogun kills on the right and destroys on the right.  
Ogun kills on the left and destroys on the left.  
Ogun kills suddenly in the house and suddenly in the field.  
Ogun kills the child with the iron with which it plays.  
Ogun kills in silence.  
Ogun kills the thief and the owner of stolen goods.  
Ogun kills the owner of the house and paints the hearth with his blood.  
Ogun is the forest god.  
He gives all his clothes to beggars:  
He gives one to the woodcock—who dyes it in indigo,  
he gives one to the coucal—who dyes it in camwood,  
he gives one to the cattle egret—who leaves it white.

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When the Alafin dies, his favourite horse is killed so that he can ride it into the world of the dead.


Katrak 89-90.


Voices Whispering in the Swamp: Prophets of Change in The Swamp Dwellers
Voices Whispering in the Swamp: Prophets of Change in The Swamp Dwellers

Neither urbanization nor migration is new to the African continent. In Nigeria alone, such cities as Kano and Zaria in the north and Benin and the Yoruba cities in the south predate Africa's contact with Europe. Traditionally, some tribes, like the cattle herding Fulani of West Africa, have always been nomadic. Also, it was not uncommon in the past for entire African communities to migrate to other areas where the soil was more fertile. However, since the colonial era introduced industrialization in urban areas, migration in Africa has changed dramatically. Industrial development has created a demand for labour in urban centres and led to the migration of large numbers of adult males from the villages to the cities. This movement of individuals who left their communities and sometimes their families behind is a radical change from traditional African migration. Secondly, both during and after the colonial period, developmental efforts have been concentrated in urban areas while rural areas have been largely neglected. Thus, there is a great disparity in economic and technological standards between urban and rural areas. The following extract from "Nigeria at 26: The March to Recovery," illustrates this:

Eighty per cent of Nigeria's population lives in

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rural areas. The peasants till the land and grow most of the food that the country consumes. Yet most of them live in abject poverty. They go without such amenities as pipe-borne water or electricity. They often have to struggle through unmotorable roads, some of them no better than bush paths, to bring the food they grow to the urban areas. In fact, not more than 27 per cent of the nation's resources have been invested in the rural areas.  

The possibility of escaping these dire economic conditions prevalent in rural areas and of attaining a higher standard of living in urban centres is what prompts the rural farmer to become a migrant worker. Thus, instead of the traditional incentive for migration, the entire community's survival, there is now a new incentive, the individual's economic advancement.

In "Migrant Labour in Africa and its Effects on Tribal Life," Margaret Read asserts that, basically, there are two types of urban immigrants. The first are the "de-tribalized Natives" who break all connections with their village of origin and regard the city as their permanent home. In rural East Africa they are known as "Machona," which literally means "the lost ones." These immigrants are much rarer than the "temporarily urbanized" Africans who maintain a link with their village of origin, return home periodically, and contribute, especially financially, to their family's and the village community's well-being.  

Rural-urban migration affects the migrant, his village of origin, and the urban centre he migrates to. The fact that there is both a positive and a negative side to rural-
urban migration has prompted Nigerian sociologist Martin Igbozurike to describe it as "a problem-solving and problem-generating process." The following extract from Margaret Read's article buttresses the validity of this description:

While migrant labour profoundly affects the social and economic life of the villages by denuding them of adult males for long periods, these villages in turn exercise a deep influence on the men who return to them periodically. It is true that the gap between the economic life of the towns and that of the villages grows wider every year. But life in the villages is not static. It is changing all the time as the men return and leave again. The gulf between urban and rural standards makes for a profound malaise in the villages, while the claims of relatives and others in the villages to financial help prevent the achieving of satisfactory standards of living in the towns on present urban wages.

Thus, rural-urban migration creates at least as many problems as it resolves.

Martin Igbozurike points out that "until quite recently what passed for rural-urban migration studies dealt mostly with the urban end of the migratory process." Also, as Polly Hill observes in Rural Hausa, relatively few studies have been devoted to rural-rural migration in Nigeria.

What all of this adds up to is a lack of information on and understanding of the specific effects—social, cultural, political and psychological—that migration, both rural-urban and rural-rural, has on rural areas. Soyinka's The Swamp Dwellers contributes to an understanding of the effects of migration on rural communities since it deals with a village affected by both rural-urban and rural-rural
migration. The play illustrates that there is both a negative and a positive side to migration. On the one hand, it portrays a village community threatened with extinction because almost all of its youth have emigrated to the city. On the other hand, it focuses on two characters who have gained new, more insightful and progressive perspectives on their traditional backgrounds because of the fact that they have migrated away from their communities.

The Swamp Dwellers is set in a hidebound, traditional Ijaw village in the coastal swamps of Southern Nigeria. Because of its adherence to tradition, the village has proved resistant to the forces of change in the past. However, its very existence is now threatened because it is being drained of its youth, who are emigrating to the city. Two of the play's principal characters are migrants. The blind beggar is a rural-rural migrant from the Hausa tribe who emigrates from the dry north to the coastal village. Igwezu, on the other hand, had emigrated from the coastal village to the city but has just returned to the village. The world of the play is a dark one in which the characters are forced to either live under the tyranny of the exploitative and regressive traditional Serpent religion or escape to the city where they live under the tyranny of a new, dehumanizing and cruel religion, materialism. The traditionalist protagonist, Igwezu, becomes a victim of the city's religion and in despair returns home to an environ-
ment and a god he had always believed in. However, his experiences in the city have made him cynical and less trusting, so when he finds he has been betrayed by the Serpent, he finally sees the religion for what it is, mere exploitative superstition. With the help of the Muslim blind beggar, who has only the Serpent religion standing between him and his dream of independence, Igwezu is finally able to repudiate the village's false god.

The play opens with the aged and bickering couple, Makuri and Alu, waiting for their son, Igwezu, to return from inspecting his ruined crops. While discussing their past, Makuri speaks of the sexual virility he possessed as a young man. In fact, it was because of his sexual prowess that he was able to keep the beautiful Alu, whom the traders tried to seduce into leaving the village:

**MAKURI:** . . . Those traders--
every one of them wanted you to go back with him;
promised he'd make you live like a lady, clothe you in silks and have servants to wait on your smallest wants . . . You don't belong here, they used to tell you. Come back with us to the city where men know the value of women . . . No, there was no doubt about it. You could have had your choice of them. You turned their heads like a pot of cane brew.

[Alu begins to smile in spite of herself.]

**MAKURI:** And the way I would go walking with you, and I could hear their heads turning round, and one tongue hanging out and saying to the other, Now I wonder what she sees in him. . . Poor fools. . . if only they knew. If only they could see me take you into the mangrove, and I so strong that I could make you gripe and sweat and sink your teeth into my cheeks.
Makuri's speech is more than an old man's reminiscence about his lost sexual prowess and his wife's enduring fidelity. In this play in which Soyinka employs a series of interconnected images and allusions, Makuri and Alu are not only representatives of the older, hidebound, traditional generation. They are also symbols of tradition. Thus, Makuri's speech is a nostalgic reflection on the great strength tradition used to possess and the older generation's loyalty to the village. The traders in turn are symbols of change. The same way Makuri's sexual prowess ensured that his wife could not be seduced by the traders, tradition's strength ensured that his generation could not be seduced by forces of change into leaving the village for the city.

It is only appropriate that Makuri is now an old man, his virility a thing of the past. Similarly, tradition is no longer virile enough to prevent Igwezu's generation from being seduced into leaving for the city:

**MAKURI:** It ruins them. The city ruins them. What do they seek there except money? They talk to the traders, and then they cannot sit still . . . There was Gonushi's son for one . . . left his wife and children . . . not a word to anyone.

(p. 87)

Thus, like Makuri, tradition can only look on helplessly as its children are lured to the city by the same forces to which Alu's generation proved so resistant. Makuri cannot understand why the situation has been reversed. As far as he is concerned, the city offers a purely materialistic
enticement—the possibility for an individual to make money. Secondly, the city not only lures the individual away from the community, but also, as in the case of Gonushi's son, it often lures him away from his family as well. Thus migration breaks up the family unit, the nucleus of traditional society, and substitutes materialism for traditional values. Yet the youth continue to leave until, as Igwezu puts it:

IGWEZU: Only the children and the old stay... Only the innocent and the dotards.
(p. 112)

Igwezu could be seen as one of the "temporarily urbanized" migrants since he stayed in touch with the village while he was in the city and has returned after only a few months to harvest his crops. His twin brother, Awuchike, who had emigrated before him, is one of the "detribalized natives" since he has cut off all ties with the village and has become wealthy in the city. Although Makuri tries repeatedly to convince his wife of these facts out repeatedly to his wife, Alu insists that Awuchike is dead. While anxiously waiting for Igwezu's return from his farm, she has the following exchange with Makuri:

ALU: I'm going out to shout his name until he hears me. I had another son before the mire drew him into the depths, I don't want Igwezu going the same way.

MAKURI [follows her.]: You haven't lost a son yet in the slough, but you will soon if you don't stop calling down calamities on their heads.

ALU: It's not what I say. The worst has happened already. Awuchike was drowned.
(p. 83)
This extract reveals the traumatic effect the emigration of a loved one can have on a family. Alu, apparently, cannot bring herself to accept that anything, even the mysterious city, could make a man cut off all ties with his family and community. She prefers to think her son is dead. In a way she is right—Awuchike has immersed himself completely in the society of the city and is dead to the village. Igwezu confirms this when he declares, "Awuchike is dead to you and to this house. Let us not raise his ghost" (p. 104). There is metaphorical logic to Alu's insistence that the son she knows emigrated to the city is dead in the swamp. The swamp is the abode of the mysterious Serpent that wields so much influence over the village. The city in turn is a place of mystery that wields an incomprehensible power over the youth. Thus, Alu speaks of the unfamiliar and incomprehensible city in terms of the mysterious but more familiar swamp.

The words "slough" and "mire" which Makuri and Alu use interchangeably with "swamp" in the extract are significant. While "swamp" is rather neutral, these words add additional dimensions to its meaning. "Slough" suggests a strong relationship between the swamp and the Serpent that is supposed to inhabit it. Thus, the swamp takes on deep religious significance. "Mire" suggests that the swamp is a sinister, slimy pit capable of trapping and drowning anyone who strays onto it.
The negative effect the city has on the emigrants makes the mire an apt metaphor for the city. Awuchike has acquired considerable wealth in the city but when his twin brother comes to him after losing all his money, he can only see an opportunity to make money. He forces Igwezu to use his last possession, his farm, as security before he loans him money. He then proceeds to seduce Igwezu's wife. In deep despair Igwezu asks his father for an explanation:

**IGWEZU:** Father, Tell me father, is my brother a better man than I?

**MAKURI:** No, son. His heart is only more suited to the city.

(p. 107)

In order to be capable of cutting off all ties with his family and community and treating his brother the way he does, Awuchike must be ruthless and hard-hearted. To seduce his own brother's wife, he must be sorely lacking in morals. These, apparently, are the characteristics which make up a "city heart," which ensure that one thrives in the city. Therefore, emigrants like Awuchike are sucked into the mire that is the city and only by dying morally and spiritually do they prosper in the heartless, materialistic city society.

Soyinka obviously means to have the audience note the contrast between Makuri's and Awuchike's generations. Makuri and Alu's fidelity to each other and their kindness and generosity to strangers are qualities which have their basis in tradition. The way Awuchike, Gonushi's son and
Igwezu's wife behave is testimony to the fact that the younger generation seems to lose the moral fibre, sense of decency, and loyalty that tradition imparts, when they leave the village.

Igwezu, however, is a model son and citizen, as Eldred Jones points out:

Igwezu... is always looking back to the village—to his parents, and to his farm which for him represents the last prop when all else failed. His first act as soon as he has made a little money in the city is to send his father a barber's chair which he had promised him when he left home—'He's a man for keeping his word.' He has religiously performed all the sacrifices required by the Priest of the Serpent, he kept his mask in the village—a concrete symbol of his spiritual attachment—indeed he is a model son and citizen.

It is only appropriate that Igwezu fails miserably in the city. Obviously, the fact that he is a traditional model son and citizen ensures Igwezu's failure in a world where only those with a city heart thrive.

The combination of his traumatic failure in the city and the failure of the crops that were his last prop shocks Igwesu out of his complacent adherence to traditional cultural values. Specifically, he begins to question the validity of both the village's religion and the Kadiye or High Priest:

**IGWEZU:** The Kadiye. I saw him when he entered this house, but I went away and continued my walk in the swamps.

**MAKURI:** You did?

**IGWEZU:** Yes, I did not trust myself.
MAKURI: You did not trust yourself? Why? What has the Kadiye ever done to you?

IGWEZU: I do not know. At this moment, I do not know. So perhaps it is as well he comes. Perhaps he can explain. Perhaps he can give meaning to what seems dark and sour . . . When I met the harshness of the city, I did not complain. When I felt the nakedness of its hostility, I accepted it. . . .

(p. 83)

Thus, Igwezu can accept his failure in the city, which after all is a hostile, foreign environment for him. What he cannot accept, although he can't yet articulate this, is the fact that the Kadiye and the Serpent have betrayed him. Even though he had made all the necessary sacrifices before leaving for the city, the Kadiye's assurance that he would thrive in the city, that his marriage would be long, happy and fruitful and that his farm would not be flooded have all proven false.

The fact that it takes Igwezu some time to articulate his religious skepticism is testimony to the strength of tradition. It is not easy for this model son and citizen to conclude that the religion he had adhered to all his life is, in essence, mere superstition. Yet it is essential that he come to this conclusion if he is to liberate himself from a religion and a High Priest that not only deny the villagers any opportunity to advance economically, but actually ensure that they can barely eke out a living.

The village is situated in the swamp so there is little arable land available, barely enough for the villagers to
subsist on. Yet the Serpent religion forbids the villagers from reclaiming land from the swamp to increase the meagre acreage they farm. Furthermore, of the little land that is arable, not all can be cultivated since the Kadiye, supposedly acting on the dictates of the Serpent, limits the size of individual farms. Also, the villagers have to make periodic sacrifices of grain, poultry and cattle to appease the Serpent. In return for their compliance with all these demands and acceptance of these restrictions, the Serpent is supposed to refrain from flooding the villagers' farms and grant their wishes. It is obviously a desire to escape these grim economic conditions as much as the possibility of leading a more comfortable life in the city that induces the younger generation to emigrate.

Despite their compliance with the Serpent's demands, the villagers' farms continue to be flooded repeatedly. This is probably why even the hidebound Makuri seems to have his doubts about the Serpent and the Kadiye. Although he appears to be a devout believer and treats the Kadiye with reverence, his occasional slips indicate that he has his reservations. At one point, he declares, "The Serpent be . . . Bah! You'll make me voice a sacrilege before I can stop my tongue" (p. 162). And behind the Kadiye's back he calls him "the pot-bellied pig." But as Eldred Jones points out, "He is not, however, ready to question any further, and contents himself with such occasional mutterings."
Igwezu's traumatic failures have equipped him with a new, cynical vision. He is now too disappointed, too angry and too desperate to be content with occasional mutterings. However, it is only with the subtle guidance of the blind beggar, who acts as a catalyst, that he brings himself to articulate his religious skepticism.

The beggar had also been a hidebound traditionalist. When he became blind as a little boy, he did exactly what tradition required of him under the circumstances:

BEGGAR: Even before anyone told me, I knew exactly what I had to do to live. A staff, a bowl, and I was out on the roads begging alms from travellers, singing my prayers, pouring out blessings upon them... (p. 91)

He then moved into Bukanji, the village of beggars. A rainy season in which an unusually high amount of rain fell in the normally dry Bukanji altered his perspective on life. For the first time it was possible for the beggars to plant crops of their own.

BEGGAR: ... We even forgot to beg, and lived on the marvel of this new birth of the land, and the rich smell of its goodness... But it turned out to have been an act of spite. The feast was not meant for us--but for the locusts.

MAKURI [involuntarily]: Locusts!

BEGGAR: They came in hordes and squatted on the land. It only took an hour or two, and the village returned to normal.

BEGGAR: I headed away from my home, and set my face towards the river. When I said to the passing stranger, friend, set my face towards the river, he replied, which river? But I only said to him, Towards any river, towards any stream; set...
my face towards the sea itself. But let there be water, because I am sick of the dryness.

(pp. 99-100)

Thus, after the locusts ruin Bukanji's hope of independence, the beggar emigrates in despair. However, it is significant that he becomes obsessed with water. It was water that had made him and the other inhabitants of Bukanji forget to beg, that had provided them the radically untraditional possibility of living a dignified, self-reliant life. Thus, his obsession with water is an indication that in addition to despair, the possibility of achieving independence also induces him to emigrate.

Although the beggar remains a devout Muslim, he has seen a positive side to the breaking of traditions, and the treatment he receives from the people he meets on his journey to the swamps endorses his view that only by breaking with the more negative customs can he escape being dependent on the charity of others for survival for the rest of his life. This strengthens his resolve to lead an independent and dignified life:

BEGGAR: . . . All the way down the river the natives read me the code of the afflicted, according to their various faiths. Some fed and clothed me. Others put money in my hands, food and drink in my bag. With some, it was the children and their stones, and sometimes the dogs followed me and whetted their teeth on my ankles. . . . Good-bye. I shall follow the river to the end.

(p. 91)

Now that he has found a place where there is an abundance of water, the beggar is hardly about to let
tradition stand in the way of his efforts to become independent:

MAKURI: What do you want?

BEGGAR: Work.

MAKURI: Work?

BEGGAR: Yes, work. I wish to work the soil. I wish to knead it between my fingers.

MAKURI: But you're blind. Why don't you beg like others? There is no true worshipper who would deny you this charity.

BEGGAR: I want a home, and I wish to work with my hands.

MAKURI [in utter bewilderment.]: You . . . the afflicted of the gods! Do you really desire to work, when even the least devout lives under the strict injunction of hospitality towards you?

BEGGAR: No more, no more.

(pp. 89-90)

The beggar soon realizes, however, that because the Serpent religion forbids reclaiming land from the swamp he cannot have a farm of his own. Rather than give up the opportunity of living and working in an area where there is an abundance of water and, therefore, a possibility of gaining independence, he offers to work on Igwezu's farm as his bondsman.

When Igwezu accepts his offer, the blind beggar, who has liberated himself from the restrictions of tradition, acts as a catalyst for Igwezu's liberation:

IGWEZU: Yes. Is it not strange that his skin is tender? Is it not strange that he is smooth and well preserved?

BEGGAR [eagerly.]: Is he fat, master? When he spoke, I detected a certain bulk in his
Do you serve the Serpent, Master? Do you believe with the old man—that the land may not be redeemed? That the rotting swamps may not be purified? How does the Serpent fare in times of dearth? Does he thrive on the poisonous crabs? Does he drink the ooze of the mire?

MAKURI [trembling with anger.]: Beware. That borders upon sacrilege. That trespasses on the hospitality of this house.

BEGGAR [with dignity.]: I beg your forgiveness. It is for the master to question the slave.

IGWEZU [thoughtfully.]: Ay. So it is . . . So it is.

Thus by asking a series of carefully chosen, particularly poignant questions, the beggar deepens Igwezu's religious skepticism, ingeniously points out the very questions Igwezu needs to find answers to in order to liberate himself completely from the Serpent religion, and prods him to make the decision to question the Kadiye.

By the time the Kadiye enters Makuri's house to be shaved, Igwezu has come to the significant conclusion, again with the beggar's guidance, that the Kadiye and the Serpent are one:

BEGGAR: Master, I think the Serpent approaches.

IGWEZU: I can hear him, bondsman. I can hear him.

It is the beggar who first identifies the Kadiye as the Serpent and the way Igwezu immediately accepts this conclusion shows that he now trusts the beggar's judgement infinitely. This implies that he has reached the beggar's
conclusion that the Kadiye is an exploitative, manipulative, degenerate priest who keeps the village in economic bondage. In fact, by accepting that the Kadiye and the Serpent are one, Igwezu seems to acknowledge that there is no Serpent in the swamp.

In the most dramatic scene in the play, the Kadiye, innocent of the change in the formerly hidebound, traditional model citizen, climbs into the barber's chair to be shaved by Igwezu. Igwezu, therefore, literally has a knife at the Kadiye's throat. As the priest sits defenceless in the chair, Igwezu appears to be ready to slit his throat at any moment as he expresses his frustration and despair and voices his disgust at the priest's exploitation of the villagers:

IGWEZU: Who must appease the Serpent of the Swamps? . . . Who takes the gifts of the people in order that the beast may be gorged and made sleepy-eyed with the feast of sacrifice . . . And so that the Serpent might not vomit at the wrong season and drown the land, so that he might not swallow at the wrong moment and gulp down the unwary traveller, do I not offer my goats to the priest?. . . And did he offer them in turn to the Serpent? . . . Everything which he received, from the grain to the bull?. . . [Igwezu has shaved off all except a last smear of lather. He remains standing with one hand around the Kadiye's jowl, the other retaining an indifferent hold on the razor, on the other side of his face.] . . . [Slowly and disgustedly]: Why are you so fat, Kadiye?

(pp. 108-109)

One has to disagree with James Gibbs, who considers this a melodramatic scene.13 Unless improperly handled, this scene provides a suspenseful, dramatic climax to the play.
The extract shows Igwezu employing the beggar's method of using incisive, rhetorical questions to make his points. Igwezu's insinuation is that the Kadiye has grown fat by keeping the villagers' sacrifices to the Serpent for himself. In the end, Igwezu attacks the Serpent religion itself:

IGWEZU: If I slew the fatted calf, Kadiye, do you think the land might breathe again? If I slew all the cattle in the land and sacrificed every measure of goodness, would it make any difference to our fates? . . . I know that the floods can come again. That the swamp will continue to laugh at our endeavours. I know that we can feed the Serpent of the Swamp and kiss the Kadiye's feet—but the vapours will still rise and corrupt the tassels of the corn.

(p. 110)

Here Igwezu repudiates the Serpent religion completely. His questions and assertions in this extract could be interpreted in two different ways. He might be saying that if there is a Serpent, then both it and the Kadiye have proven and will continue to be ineffective. It is more likely, however, that he is denying the very existence of the Serpent. The only Serpent is the Kadiye. As Igwezu concludes shortly after, "You lie upon the land, Kadiye, and choke it in the folds of a serpent" (p. 110). The implied conclusion is the same with both interpretations—the villagers have needlessly allowed a corrupt priest to keep them in dire economic straits.

When he is finally allowed to escape, the Kadiye makes a hurried and ignominious exit. But Igwezu has little time
to savour his victory. The scurrying Kadiye's strident promise to get even is no empty threat. Realizing that the Kadiye could turn the entire village against his son and his household, Makuri advises Igwezu to leave the village, at least until things cool down. Igwezu's departure at the end of the play is a typical example of Soyinka's intriguing yet unsatisfying endings:

IGWEZU [still looking out of the window. Pauses. He walks away, picks up the old man's work in absent movements. He drops it and looks up.]
Only the children and the old stay here, bondsman. Only the innocent and the dotards. [Walks slowly off.]

BEGGAR: But you will return, master?
[Igwezu checks briefly, but does not stop.]

BEGGAR: . . . [The door swings to. The Beggar sighs, gestures a blessing and says.] I shall be here to give account.

(p. 112)

Because he is the only member of the community who has liberated himself from the Serpent religion, Igwezu is the most obvious candidate for the role of reformer of his society. The very future of the community could depend on whether or not he returns to the village. Yet Soyinka leaves this crucial question unanswered, thus leaving the audience and the fate of the village in suspense.

Despite its intriguing, suspenseful ending, The Swamp Dwellers is an anomaly, a weak Soyinkan play. Several critics, including James Gibbs, John Ferguson, Margaret Laurence, and Gerald Moore find the play unsatisfactory. The Swamp Dwellers is one of Soyinka's earliest plays and
this, combined with the fact that it is set not in Yorubaland but in a tribal and regional background that the playwright does not know quite as intimately, is probably what is responsible for the play's weakness.

The critics mentioned have pointed out some of the play's weaknesses. For example, Gibbs points out that the Delta setting is barely adequate since it lacks the subtlety and the telling detail which distinguishes the plays set in communities the playwright knows more intimately. Also, Moore finds that the play's language lacks Soyinka's usual distinction and energy and that the Kadiye remains a stage villain and is not realized as a person.

Several other items could be added to the list of criticisms. One of these is the fact that Soyinka's extensive use of symbolism, with starts off as a strength, becomes a weakness in the end. The use of the swamp as a symbol is a prime example. The swamp is firstly a symbol of tradition's positive strength:

MAKURI: . . . Those traders--every one of them wanted you to go back with him. . . and the way I would go walking with you and I could hear their heads turning round, and one tongue hanging out and saying to the other, Now I wonder what she sees in him. . . Poor fools . . . if only they knew. If only they could see me take you out into the mangrove, and I so strong that I could make you gripe and sweat and sink your teeth into my cheeks.

(p. 85)

The fact that Makuri, who has already been identified as a symbol of tradition, repeatedly brought Alu to the swamp to
prove tradition's strength and refute the promises of the forces of change, suggests that the swamp too is a symbol of tradition's positive strength. The couple even spent their honeymoon night in the swamp and their twin sons were conceived there. People even suggest that the boys were the colour of the swamp. The couple have fond memories of the times they bonded in the swamps just as they have fond memories of the times when the entire community was bonded by tradition. All of this reinforces the idea that the swamp is a symbol of the positive aspects of tradition.

Yet the swamp is also a symbol of the negative aspects of tradition as well. It is a place of physical danger and the villagers make sacrifices to the Serpent to ensure that they won't be drowned in it. Finally, it is a symbol of the corruption of both traditional and modern corruption. This is brought out in Igwezu's reply to Makuri's advice that he leave the village and return to the city: "Is it of any earthly use to change one slough for another?". In the end, therefore, the swamp becomes a symbol for so many things that the audience is unlikely to be able to keep track of its ever-shifting and, ultimately, contradictory meanings.

Soyinka attempts to portray the beggar as a Christ figure:

[Alu squats down and washes his feet. When this is finished, she wipes them dry, takes a small jar from one of the shelves, and rubs his feet with some form of ointment.] (p. 88)

This scene is reminiscent of the washing and anointing of
Jesus' feet in the Bible and obviously intended to associate the beggar with Christ in the minds of the audience. Eldred Jones asserts that,

The beggar is . . . Christ-like in that he enters a hidebound traditional society and makes men begin to think again. He gives himself selflessly and unasked for the good of others.  

However, the beggar's decision to become Igwezu's bondsman is not as selfless as Jones apparently believes. The beggar realizes that he cannot have a farm of his own because of the Serpent religion, yet he does not want to give up the possibility of living and farming in a village that has an abundance of water, which he associates with independence. In short, he is willing to become a bondsman in an area that promises eventual independence. And, anyway, working on someone else's farm is a step above begging for survival. Thus the beggar definitely has his own welfare in mind when he offers to become Igwezu's bondsman. Also, although the beggar helps Igwezu not only to think but to liberate himself from a misguided religion, he does not convert him to any other religion. The fact that he leaves his protege in spiritual limbo is a very significant difference between him and Christ. The analogy Soyinka draws between the beggar and Christ is, therefore, rather tenuous.

Another weakness in the play is the fact that its entire world is dark. The city is portrayed as a mysterious, evil place that robs the village of its youth, then turns them into corrupt, selfish individuals. The village
is trapped in a life-stifling, exploitative religion, which keeps its inhabitants hovering on the brink of starvation. Also, the community is threatened with extinction since all the youth are leaving. Igwezu and others like him have only two choices—they can live in the corrupt, evil city or in the corrupt, dying village. This unrealistically negative portrayal of African society is as dangerous as its opposite, the romanticizing of African society found in negritudinist works. It appears to support the image of traditional African societies as unprogressive, corrupt and tethered to restrictive superstitions.

The problem is that the young Soyinka does not portray the world of the play from an insider's perspective. It is interesting that the more mature Soyinka portrays what could be seen as a negative religious practice in Death and the King's Horseman, namely, the Death of Death tradition, much more sympathetically. In that play, the audience comes to understand and even to sympathize with the Yorubas' views on the tradition. In The Swamp Dwellers, the audience is left with the impression that the villagers incomprehendingly cling with naivety to mere superstition.

The Swamp Dwellers indicates that Soyinka is not a narrow-minded traditionalist. Even though Makuri and Alu begin the play with an affirmation of the positive aspects of tradition and a nostalgic look back on the days when tradition kept the community united, Soyinka soon offers us
proof that tradition can also have negative aspects to it.
The tradition which requires that people extend hospitality
and give charity to the handicapped is a classic example of
a tradition that has both a positive and a negative side to
it. Although it is obviously designed to ensure that
handicapped people survive, it puts them in the degrading
position of being constantly dependent on the charity of
others and makes it almost impossible for people like the
blind beggar, who are determined to lead independent,
dignified lives, to do so. Soyinka uses the Serpent
religion to illustrate that there is a negative side to
unquestioning adherence to tradition. Through the Kadiye he
shows how unscrupulous individuals can exploit an entire
community's religious faith for their own profit. The
Kadiye not only gets fat at the villagers' expense, he keeps
them impoverished and on the verge of starvation to maintain
his control over them.

In cases like these, where tradition is either particu-
larly restrictive or is corrupt and exploitative, Soyinka
recommends, through the example of the blind beggar and
Igwezu, that people break such traditions rather than adhere
blindly to them. Interestingly, however, even as Soyinka
celebrates these characters' liberation from negative
traditions, he emphasizes tradition's strength through them.
From his Muslim salutation at his first entrance to the
Muslim blessing he bestows on the departing Igwezu at the
end of the play, the beggar remains as devout a believer as he has been all his life. Thus, he does not repudiate tradition entirely; he only rejects the custom that sentences him to a lifetime of dependence. The point Soyinka appears to make through the beggar is that one can dissent from particular customs if necessary without abandoning tradition altogether.

Igwezu, who abandons his religion completely, pays a high price for his freedom. It is doubtful he can return to the village, since the entire community will probably be turned against him by the Kadiye if he does. Eldred Jones points out that

Igwezu has gone through an experience which has shaken his old beliefs, and so when he sets out, it is without the old props afforded by the Kadiye and the Serpent. The question is whether he is strong enough to go through life on his own. We do not know, and he does not know. 

Thus Igwezu is left to face an uncertain future without the traditional props to support him. All he has now is his freedom and it is doubtful that this alone is enough to see him through life. Even as Soyinka celebrates Igwezu's independence from misguided tradition, he also illustrates how naked and vulnerable the individual who abruptly abandons tradition becomes. Finally, the fact that the misguided Serpent religion remains in place at the end of the play while the enlightened Igwezu has to flee is testimony of tradition's strength.

When the Kadiye makes his ignominious exit, the beggar
addresses Igwezu as "the slayer of Serpents." However, Igwezu's victory is personal. The Serpent is dead only in the sense that it has no more power over him. The rest of the village is still caught in its choking folds. But Igwezu's personal victory does have significance for the community in general. Ketu Katrak asserts that,

his words of protest have struck the first note of discord in the minds of the tradition-bound swamp dwellers. Igwezu's moral courage has enabled him to express some unpleasant truths which the villagers are too afraid to express... Igwezu's new awareness of his ability to break with the past will not be forgotten.**

Thus Igwezu has taken the first necessary step towards freeing the entire community from the more restrictive aspects of the Serpent religion. If he returns, it is possible that he might take up this task. If he does not, the beggar might take up the challenge, which was initiated at his instigation. In fact, as Katrak observes, the beggar, who is definitely going to stay on, remains the last ray of hope for the village at the end of the play. But even though he has the fortitude, tenacity and wisdom to undertake the task, there is only a vague possibility that he will do so. His last promise is only that he "shall be here to give account."

In the end, therefore, as far as the community is concerned, both Igwezu and the beggar are more prophets of positive change than forces of change. They have pointed out the way to change, but it is uncertain whether the
community will follow their directions. They have called out to the villagers to emerge from the mire, but in this hidebound community their voices are no more than whispers in the swamp.
Notes


4 Igbozurike 66.

5 Read 233.

6 Igbozurike 64.

7 Polly Hill, Rural Hausa: A Village and a Setting (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972) 103-104.

8 Although Soyinka does not specify this, critics agree that the village in the play is an Ijaw village. For example, see Margaret Laurence's Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists 1952-1966 (London: Macmillan, 1968) 24.

9 Though Soyinka does not specify that the beggar is from the Hausa tribe, John Ferguson identifies him as an Hausa in "Nigerian Drama in English," Modern Drama 11.1 (May, 1968): 20.

10 Wole Soyinka, "The Swamp Dwellers," in Wole Soyinka: Collected Plays 1 (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973) 85. All subsequent quotations from The Swamp Dwellers will be identified by page number.


12 Jones 20.

13 James Gibbs, "'Grafting is an Ancient Art': The Relationship of African and European Elements in the Early Plays of Wole Soyinka," World Literature Written in English 24.1 (1984): 93. Gibbs considers this scene so melodramatic that he suggests that Igwezu seems to earn himself the title of "Demon Barber of the Swamps." However, see John Ferguson's "Nigerian Drama in English," Modern Drama in English 11.1 (May 1968): 20. Ferguson describes the scene
as "dramatically excellent."

1^See the following: Gibbs 92; Ferguson 20; Laurence 25.

2^Gibbs 94.


1^Jones 19.

1^Jones 23


2^Katrak 137.
Progressive Traditionalism:
Conclusions About Change, Traditional Society, and Soyinka
Progressive Traditionalism: Conclusions About Change, Traditional Society, and Soyinka

In his article "The European and African Critical Reception of Wole Soyinka," Etienne Galie outlines the interesting variety of perspectives from which Soyinka's works have been analyzed. Martin Esslin admits to knowing little about Soyinka's social and cultural background and attempts to interpret his plays "not as African plays but as plays pure and simple." The importance of having a knowledge of the playwright's background in order to appreciate his plays, which has been stressed in the first chapter of this thesis, is borne out in the fact that Esslin "seems to feel he has been asked to achieve an impossible task, and confines himself to brief summaries." The more comprehensive and insightful analyses have been written by critics like Eldred Jones, Gerald Moore, Alain Ricard, and Oyin Ogunba, who do have some knowledge of Soyinka's background.

Eldred Jones stresses the playwright's universalism. He believes Soyinka's convictions are universal and that the playwright uses Yoruba or Nigerian settings to make statements about mankind in general. Gerald Moore stresses that Soyinka's social and political commitment, like that of African writers in general, is inevitable, and insists on the strong African, Yoruba character of Soyinka's thought.
Alain Ricard makes use of the concept of literature as social product. He draws a parallel between Soyinka and the Black American playwright Le Roi Jones, now Imsma Baralec. He "compares the two dramatic universes in which racial conflicts, claims for cultural identity and political myths are associated." Oyin Ogunba believes that Soyinka's first care is the spiritual and political health of his community and that "the evolution of Nigerian society is a constant object of observation for Soyinka who also endeavours to be its conscience and guide." For him Soyinka's works are studies in the transition of Nigerian society.

Of course, all of these critics undertake close examinations and evaluations of Soyinka's methodology, yet each of them makes his literary analysis within the scope of a particular, encompassing hypothesis. Each of these hypotheses has its strengths and weaknesses and, as Galie points out in his conclusion,

no one hypothesis, no matter how well chosen, will illuminate the unity and order the complexity of the work whose critical reception we have . . . surveyed here. Only by multiple readings of the plays, poems and novels, with the help of various critics and through patient daily reflection can one hope to explicate to oneself and to others the rich substance offered by this treasury of African wisdom.

There is, therefore, no single approach to Soyinka which is necessarily the most correct or which will bring out all the facets of his creative talent.

The topic of this thesis suggests its encompassing
hypothesis. The selected plays have been considered from the perspective that Soyinka's work addresses Nigeria's and, by extension, Africa's socio-cultural and political issues. Justification for the validity of this hypothesis is easy to come by. For example, Ketu Katrak has asserted that Soyinka's "fierce sense of social and political responsibility [is] uppermost in all his creative . . . work." Soyinka himself has declared that he writes primarily for an African audience and his interviews reflect his concern with Nigerian and African issues. Finally, as the following extract from one of his articles clearly indicates, Soyinka believes that the writer must not only serve as social commentator but as visionary and guide for his people:

I have heard a lot about the duties of the writer in society. To this my eternal response has been and continues to be--the writer is a visionary of his people, he recognizes past and present not for the purposes of enshrinement but for the logical-creative glimpse and statement of the ideal future. He anticipates and he warns. It is not always enough for the writer to be involved in the direct physical struggle of today, he often cannot help but envisage and seek to protect the future.

Within the scope of its hypothesis, this thesis has made a thorough analysis of Soyinka's methodology and subject-matter in three plays to bring out the playwright's view on a specific socio-cultural issue.

The thesis has proven that Soyinka's plays can serve a utilitarian purpose. It has found that in the three selected plays Soyinka thoroughly examines three different aspects of a particular issue, namely, the diversification
or adulteration of traditional Nigerian society. But this was anticipated given the fact that Soyinka subscribes to the Afrocentric school of thought that holds that Africa cannot afford art merely for art's sake, that African literature must also serve a utilitarian purpose. What is more interesting is the fact that collectively, the plays can be considered an illustration of Soyinka's progressive traditionalism.

Soyinka takes a strong traditionalist stance in two of the three plays. In *The Lion and the Jewel* he shows a village that resists the attempts of a misguided modernist to convince them to embrace modernization. It is obvious that he believes the village is better off under the rule of the wily and corrupt traditionalist, Baroka, than under the guidance of the enthusiastic but bumbling and misguided Lakunle. In *Death and the King's Horseman* he portrays a Yoruba community that remains unaffected by the colonialists' attempts to modify their culture to suit the expectations of British morality. The principal factor responsible for the Yorubas' ability to resist the colonialists' efforts to alter their traditions is the strength and richness of their culture. Thus, he dramatizes Janheinz Jahn's assertion that

The problem for the African masses are not those of de-colonization, because, let's face it, they have never been colonized. Their spirit has not been colonized, never even been touched . . . simply because, in keeping with their own value systems, they consistently considered all European
It is only in *The Swamp Dwellers* that he endorses the breaking of tradition and he does so only because, in this case, tradition has become so restrictive that it threatens the very survival of the community.

Soyinka emphasizes tradition's strength in all three plays. Characters who have repudiated tradition are constantly made to pay a heavy price. Lakunle in *The Lion and the Jewel* and Amusa in *Death and the King's Horseman* are portrayed as being unable to command respect. Despite the fact that he is the village school teacher, Lakunle is the butt of the villagers' jokes. Similarly, Sargeant Amusa is considered a despicable lackey of the colonialists. Igwezu in *The Swamp Dwellers* is forced to flee his village at the end of the play. Thus, irrespective of whether the characters made a break with tradition for positive or negative reasons, they end up becoming misfits in their own communities.

Olunde's return to his community and his subsequent suicide is one of Soyinka's most forceful demonstrations of tradition's strength. Olunde had left the community to study medicine in England. One of the market women had asserted that the hereditary title of King's Horseman exerted such a strong influence that Olunde could not help but fulfill his destiny by becoming Chief Horseman. When Olunde returns to the community and even commits suicide to
take Elesin's place, the Yoruba woman's prophecy, which she makes out of an implicit faith in tradition's power, comes to fruition. Olunde's case is similar to Eman's in another of Soyinka's plays, *The Strong Breed*. Eman is a teacher who has moved from his native village. He is descended from a line of "carriers" yet has no intention of becoming one. When his new community attempts to make a small boy its carrier, Eman feels a mysterious, irrepressible urge to take on the role. He takes the boy's place and dies playing the role of carrier. In both cases tradition asserts not just a strong, but an almost supernatural influence on the characters.

Soyinka sounds a warning against false prophets of modernism. In *The Lion and the Jewel*, Lakunle's modern ideas are either wrong or limited to superficialities and his overzealous brand of modernism would involve sweeping aside literally everything traditional. He is obviously the playwright's warning against the trend of regarding the introduction of anything and everything modern as being beneficial to rural communities. In *Death and the King's Horseman* Soyinka gives a specific example of the inherent folly in introducing laws and rules which reflect western values into traditional African societies without taking the indigenous cultures into account.

Despite his endorsement and celebration of tradition, Soyinka is not a hidebound traditionalist. For example, he
avoids the mistake negritudinist writers make of glorifying and romanticizing Africa's traditional society. In his article "From a Common Back Cloth: A Reassessment of the African Literary Image" he declares that "idealization is a travesty of literary truth; worse still, it betrays only immature hankering of the creative impluse." This conviction is born out in his plays. In Baroka he presents a corrupt, self-indulgent ruler who keeps the forces of modernization at bay primarily to maintain his luxurious and voluptuous lifestyle. In The Swamp Dwellers he presents an equally corrupt priest, the Kadiye, who has grown fat exploiting the villagers by keeping their sacrifices to the Serpent for himself. The play also shows a village that has allowed traditions associated with their religion to bring them repeatedly to the brink of starvation when they could lead more comfortable lives by amending or rejecting those traditions.

Soyinka celebrates the courage of Igwezu and the beggar who free themselves from dangerously restrictive or life-stifling traditions. Also, the response of the villagers of Illujinle to change is probably one Soyinka endorses. They adhere to tradition and laugh off Lakunle's preposterous ideas for modernizing the village. However, they do adopt the few propositions he makes which will be truly beneficial to the community. For example, they send their children to Lakunle's school and organize themselves into unions like
The Palace Workers Union. Thus, Soyinka does not advocate unquestioning and hidebound adherence to tradition, but he only recommends the introduction of carefully selected, particularly beneficial aspects of modernization and westernization, and the rejection of life-stifling, exploitative aspects of tradition.

It is interesting that even though the forces of tradition appear to be victorious at the end of all three plays, in at least two of them the perceptive audience is left with the impression that this victory is temporary, that the forces of change will prevail in the end. Baroka might have won Sidi and maintained control over the village in *The Lion and the Jewel* but the photographer is making more frequent visits to the village and is already influencing the village youth. Also, Lakunle has the village children to himself for hours every day. It is quite feasible that his proteges will grow up to become Lakunles. What Baroka celebrates at the end of the play, therefore, is a victory in a single battle of a war he will inevitably lose. Even though tradition appears victorious at the end of *The Swamp Dwellers* when Igwezu is forced to flee the village, the future belongs to the forces of change. The village has a choice between amending or repudiating some of the customs associated with the Serpent religion and maintaining the status quo. If it chooses to adhere to the religion as it is, the community will eventually die from
the drain of its youth who keep leaving for the city. If they do amend or repudiate their religious customs, the forces of positive change will have won. The inevitability of change in the village is implied in Eldred Jones' description of the community as "a society in a state of change."

The fact that change will inevitably win in these communities only becomes apparent when the audience looks beyond the end of the play, beyond the present, and considers the communities' future. This is Soyinka's adroit way of making the plays reflect the reality of traditional Nigerian communities while indulging in a celebration of tradition. Harold Collins has asserted in his article "The Cultural Critics of African Literature" that "purity in a culture is not necessarily desirable, and probably not possible anyway." While it is doubtful that Soyinka believes that purity of culture is not desirable, he does concede in his plays that it is probably impossible. The plays celebrate tradition's present strength but warn of the strength of the forces of change which, even now, besiege rural communities and threaten to bring about the demise of traditional culture.

Collectively, the three plays that have been examined indicate that Soyinka is a progressive traditionalist who acknowledges that modernization, westernization and migration are formidable and sometimes beneficial forces of
change. However, he sounds a warning against embracing them too readily and too completely since this could lead to the demise of traditional Nigerian culture. He celebrates the strength of tradition in rural areas and advocates the preservation of traditional culture. The only forms of change he endorses are the rejection of particularly restrictive and exploitative customs, and the introduction of particularly beneficial aspects of change.
Notes


2 Galie 21.


6 "Quoted by Phanuel Egejuru, "Who is the Audience of Modern African Literature?" Obsidian 5 (1979): 53.

7 Wole Soyinka, "An Interview with Wole Soyinka," Black World 24.10 (1975): 41. Soyinka explains that the carrier was supposed to bear all the evils of the year in his person. The stress and spiritual tension this causes meant that carriers lived rather short lives.


9 Jones 17.

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