

African tradition and culture in death and the king's horseman

Literature



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Death And The King's Horseman by Wole Soyinka tells the story of the importance of tradition in African culture. The play follows the life of Elesin Oba, who had the career title of "The King's Horseman", and his obligation to follow an African tradition of a ritualistic suicide following the death of their king. As the play goes on, Soyinka illustrates the importance of this tradition in African culture and shows what it means when the tradition is not fulfilled in this culture. By demonstrating the importance of culture and rituals in this play, Soyinka demonstrates how each culture, though very different, has their own rituals and beliefs that make their society what it is.

An important aspect of rituals and cultural beliefs in African society is the history that the ritual brings along with it. In the academic journal "Death and the King's Horseman: A Poet's Quarrel With His Culture", Wole Ogundele provides a brief background of the importance of this ritual in African society. He states, "Oral history tells us that originally, the olokun esin (Master of the Horse) did not have to die along with his king for any reason at all, political or metaphysical. The first olokun esin to die did so willingly. The reason, the oral historians say, was that that particular olokun esin and the king were uncommonly close friends" (Ogundele). As the paper goes on, he explains that, "When the king died, this particular olokun esin thought that the only way to demonstrate his love and loyalty to his friend, the dead king, was to die, too" (Ogundele). However, when colonization occurred in Africa, the empire that was responsible for the creation of this tradition began to fade as new, more modern traditions began to be taught. The journal states, "The colonial religion preached an alternative cosmic order in which ritual self-immolation on behalf of society is neither desirable nor

necessary” (Ogundele), thus began the demise of this tradition. However, the ritual still survived in some ways. As the journal illustrates, “ Precisely because the obligation to die was now no longer a military but spiritual affair, the two aspects of the warrior ethics, which had hitherto been complementary, were now discrete entities. The rights and privileges attached to the office might still be embraced—but the reciprocal obligation recoiled from” (Ogundele). Having learned about the culture that inspired the play and the rituals that serve as a fundamental aspect in the play itself, it is important to see how Soyinka demonstrates these rituals in the play.

The descriptions of these rituals and traditions throughout the play serve as a key theme and are very important to the play itself. The play begins with Elesin, the king’s horseman, and the praise-singer, who serves as sort of the chorus of this play, describing how the king has died and now Elesin must be prepared to perform the ritualistic suicide in order to keep the tradition going. Later in this scene, Elesin gives a monologue that describes the importance of being comfortable with death and knowing that he must perform the ritual. He states, “ Life has an end. A life that will outlive/ Fame and friendship begs another name./... Life is honour./ It ends when honour ends” (Soyinka, Scene 1). As the play continues, the time of the ritual comes and it is now time for Elesin to fulfill his duties. The suicide process begins to occur as Elesin dances and slowly moves into a trance with the music that is being performed at the ceremony. As he dances and moves more and more into his trance, the Praise-Singer describes how it is becoming more and more visible that Elesin’s soul is no longer present in his body, and how the death is beginning to occur. The ritual will soon be complete, however British

officers soon arrive and break up the ceremony, preventing the suicide from occurring. As this occurs, the play begins to move from the more spiritual history of the culture to its more historical background. After developing more of an understanding for the cultural background of the ritual that plays a fundamental role throughout this play, gaining an understanding of the history of the play itself becomes an important detail in order to gain a full comprehension of what this play is trying to illustrate.

While the culture and rituals that are performed in this play serve as a significant theme throughout the play, it is important to remember the historical accuracies of the events that the play is based on. In the play, when the ritualistic suicide is about to occur, a British officer arrests the king's horseman in order to prevent his suicide from occurring. This is based on a historical event that occurred as colonization was beginning to occur in many African countries. The history is described in greater detail in an academic journal by Nick Tembo entitled "History, Religion, and the Dramaturgy of Victimization and Betrayal". Tembo states, "When the ritual was to be celebrated in 1946m the British District Officer went out and arrested the Elesin Oba and threw him into jail because, according to British law, attempts suicide was a criminal offence' (Tembo). As the journal goes on, Tembo illustrates that "The overriding issue here is history; that something actually happened in history. [Soyinka] is also out to tell us that African history should not necessarily be looked at as something that found its true essence with the presence of the white man" (Tembo). The events of the play demonstrate this history due to the fact that Pilkings and his men are responsible for preventing Elesin from completing his ritualistic suicide.

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After learning of both the cultural and historical backgrounds of this play, it is important to see how Soyinka himself portrays these facts in the play itself.

While the cultural aspects of the play have already been illustrated, the historical details of the play serve as an important detail. The main historical detail that is important in this play is the inclusion of the British District officer, Pilkings, and his blatant disrespect of the African rituals and cultures throughout the whole play. This begins in scene two when Pilkings and his wife are preparing to go a party and Pilkings decides to wear an important cultural dress of the African people as a costume. Amusa, who seems to be a servant to Pilkings and his wife, sees that Pilkings is wearing the dress and begs him to take it off, explaining how it is very dangerous for anyone to be wearing this ritualistic outfit. Pilkings ignores the warning and proceeds to read the letter that Amusa has delivered. The letter explains how the Elesin Oba is planning on performing the ritualistic sacrifice, and Pilkings becomes enraged. Pilkings states, " I'll have the man arrested. Everyone remotely involved. In any case there may be nothing to it. Just rumors" (Soyinka, Scene 2). As Pilkings learns more about the act, he continues to mock how he has interfered so much with their traditions and how nothing bad has happened to him because of the actions that he has committed. Eventually, Pilkings prevents the suicide from occurring, which leads to a huge uproar of the African people. They are all furious that their traditions cannot be completed. Elesin's son, who has returned to see his father's corpse and keep the tradition going, sees that his father was prevented from committing the ritualistic suicide and decides that he must kill himself in order to keep the tradition alive. The heartbreak of losing his son ends up killing Elesin. All

of the African people are furious at Pilkings for preventing their rituals from happening and blame him for all of the terrible events that occurred due to the fact that he stopped the rituals and tried to change their culture.

The prevention of these rituals and the usage of the historical background of the play serve as a representation of how the colonialism that began to occur in Africa during this time ended up ruining a lot of important aspects of African culture and changed what they believe in. This can be illustrated by Iyaloja's speech at the end of the play. She is talking directly to Pilkings after the death of both Elosin and Olunde, when Pilkings asks if this is what their people wanted to happen. She replies by saying, " 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" (Soyinka, Scene 5). This scene begins to perfectly illustrate the point that Soyinka is trying to make throughout this play, which is that the Colonization of Africa ended up greatly impacting their culture as a whole and that the white men ended up trying only to destroy the culture that they had previously created. This theme can be summed up by M. B. Omigbule in his journal entitled " Proverbs in Wole Soyinka's Construction of Paradox", in which he claims, " Tragedy, being a more serious form of art than comedy, provides Soyinka with an enormous opportunity in *Death* to examine the Yoruba metaphysics and, consequently, put to test the strength of the culture with is explained and sustained by the metaphysics in the face of the transition occasioned by modernity" (Omigbule). This quote is used to describe how difficult it was for the African people to keep up their tradition as colonization occurred due to the fact that the European people did no

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share any of the same values that the African people possessed, and they wished for the African people to be more like them.

The use of historical and ritualistic concepts of African beliefs throughout *Death and the King's Horseman* allows Soyinka to make an excellent commentary on how European colonization impacted the African people and how their society lost a lot of the traditional and spiritual values that it once possessed due to European disregard for the importance of their cultural values. This play does a great job of portraying the historical prevention of the ritualistic suicide and how the colonization impacted African culture as a whole. With the inclusion of these historical and spiritual values, Soyinka is able to make a proper social commentary on the social and cultural factors that colonization destroyed in African society and how colonization as a whole had a negative impact on Africa and its people.