

Les maitres fous and theories of colonialism research paper example

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The 1955 short film *Les Maitres Fous* follows the Hauka movement of 1950s Ghana, in which Ghanans would perform ritual dances and impressions of Colonial administrators. Ostensibly taking on the roles of these British colonizers, the Ghanans would go into a trance and perform the ceremonies that their colonial overlords would perform for themselves. The Hauka movement, as depicted in the film and by director Jean Rouch, is meant to be a form of resistance against the cruel British colonialism that robbed them of their freedom. However, many people (particularly Africans) saw the depiction of the Hauka rituals to be offensive and implied a sort of attempt to rise up within the colonial government, instead of rejecting it outright. From a philosophical standpoint, this film can be viewed from many different perspectives - in this essay, *Les Maitres Fous* will be viewed through the eyes of famed sociological figures Emile Durkeim, Clifford Geertz, and Max Weber.

In the film, the day to day lives of the Hauka, who work in Accra, are juxtaposed with the ceremonies they perform. While they begin to take on the traits of the British administration, they perform other acts, like erecting a Governor's statue only to crack an egg over it, and killing and eating a dog (which is expressly forbidden by their own religion). That is meant to be a symbol of them transgressing their own faiths and becoming the British colonials - at the same time, demonizing them by implying that they feel it is okay to eat dogs. They prove themselves impervious to pain by soaking their hands in boiling water, stepping outside human boundaries to become superhumans (who presumably cannot be touched or affected by British rule; alternatively, that the British are cruel and unfeeling people who do not act like human beings). The ritual itself is a crude exercise in imitation for the

sake of effigy; the Hauka become the British oppressors to note how ugly and unrelatable they are.

Emile Durkeim was a philosopher and anthropologist whose primary focus was investigating the ways in which primitive societies could translate and transition to the modern world. Because there is no more assumption of the old connections to religion and social norms, there is often an entirely new school of thought associated with modernity that many societies have to struggle to keep up with. In his book *The Division of Labor in Society*, he claims that social order is maintained using either organic or mechanical solidarity. In transitioning a society from primitive to modern, there may be varying complications that happen as a result; at the same time, Durkeim feels the transition is worth it due to the increased strength that the society feels as a result.

Watching *Les Maitres Fous*, Durkeim would use these principles to determine that the Hauka rituals are a consequence of this transition into a modern society. The hardships that come with this transition include the British colonization, and the abandonment of the Ghanan culture that existed there before, with its emphasis on witch doctors and Yoruba religious practices. At the same time, Durkeim would find merit in the collective conscience that the Hauka people discovered; the rituals would then be a way for the whole of the Hauka culture to gather around and maintain a kind of social order within that framework - a mechanical solidarity. Since Durkeim's ultimate thesis is that societies benefit by transferring to a more modern society though, he would likely see the Hauka as a symptom of the resistance that

occurs when this necessary change happens. This attempt to usurp or resist British colonialism merely stands in the way of progress, and it must be discouraged.

Clifford Geertz was an anthropologist who focused on symbolic anthropology, a practice in which symbols are used as the primary means of determining the mindset and priorities of a people. According to Geertz, culture is " a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (1973, p. 89). Geertz was focused on why people did things, and what it said about their culture, as everything from actions to symbols was interpreted as informing the sociological makeup of a culture.

In the case of Les maitres fous, Geertz would likely see the Hauka movement and attempt to determine why these people do it by examining every facet of human movement within the rituals. Every bit of the ritual - from the cracking of eggs on the Governor's head to the drooling and trancelike possession of the British administration - would be seen as a sign of taking ownership of their culture. Erecting the statue of the Governor could be interpreted as a means of pretending to adhere to colonial rule, but the egg being broken on the head is the final defiance of that administration, which lies in their hearts. It is a kind of wish fulfillment that they wish they could enact in the real world. Geertz would look at this kind of ceremony as a means to take ownership of their situation - they resent the British takeover of their country, and are using these rituals to provide a kind of cathartic

release of their frustrations. It is a very functional viewpoint to take, one which is very much in line with Geertz's assertions.

Max Weber, seen by many to be one of the most important figures in sociology and philosophy, his chief objective was often to track the increasing secularization of society, moving away from religion and towards a more capitalist, modern culture. In *Politics as a Vocation*, Weber describes the nation-state and its sense of authority as a "monopoly on the legitimate use of violence" (1964, p. 154). Weber, then, would likely view Les maitres fous through the eyes of the British government, and what factors led to things like the Hauka movement taking shape.

In terms of viewing Les Maitres Fous, Weber would view it from an interpretive perspective, somewhat similar to Geertz. He would attempt to interpret the social actions of the Hauka to become more informed about their mindset, and what the rituals themselves mean. Since states are given a legitimate monopoly on violence as a means to rule, it would be difficult for him to dispute the legitimacy of the British government's oppression. However, he could still understand that the Hauka rituals come from a place of resistance and dissatisfaction with the way they are being ruled (and the fact they are being ruled). While Weber would advocate a traditional revolution in the event of a tyrannical rule, the fact that the British colonials used bureaucratic administration (albeit a harsh variety) means that this move was part of social evolutionism, one of his own theories. The Hauka rituals would be seen as a return to strict emotion and custom, while aping the secularization and cynicism apparent in modern British society, as

evidenced by the way in which the colony was ruled. Hauka rituals mock rationalization, and therefore Weber would cite them as a throwback to a more primitive, less modern society.

As for my own assessment of the rituals, I am of very mixed feelings. On one hand, I believe that the exercise was conducted with a measure of sensitivity - through the passion and the frenzy of the rituals, I could sense the Ghanans attempting to take some sort of power back for themselves, and not just resigning themselves to having no agency. At the same time, I felt as though the film focused on the more sensationalist elements of the rituals - for example, the very first shot we see of the Hauka is of a savage-looking man, eyes wide, drool forming from his mouth, opening his mouth wide and closing it repeatedly in a strange trance. The lighting is extremely severe, and it is clearly meant to be a frightening image. From this perspective, it is easy to see how Rouch could be accused of exoticizing the Ghanans and the Hauka to an absurd degree. What's more, I did agree with some critics who say that the portrayal of the Hauka here was meant to imply that they wanted a better place within British colonial society, instead of just having their own culture back and stopping colonialism. They seemed as though they had seen the amenities that the British colonials enjoyed, and simply wanted to assimilate into that culture.

In conclusion, the varying perspectives one can have on Les Maitres Fous depend greatly on the sociological perspective one has. Durkeim, noting the importance of mechanical solidarity, would consider the Hauka people to have a collective conscience - this group perspective of taking away the

powers of the British colonials would bring them together as a society. Geertz would investigate the actual phenomenon of the Hauka ceremonies more thoroughly, and conclude that the imitation of the British colonial officials was meant as a way to demonstrate the resentment and frustration the Ghanans have at their lack of agency and freedom under British rule. Weber would take the perspective of the British government, looking at these "noble savages" with scorn, and feeling that their oppression is necessary for maintaining stable politics on the region. As for me, I found the depiction of the Haukas in the film to be both haunting and somewhat offensive, as I can see the exotic casual racism inherent in the way the Haukas was shown. All of these perspectives and more are valid from a sociological standpoint, and the existence of so many cements the complex nature of the state of Ghana in the 1950s.

Works Cited

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