

Soyinka's kongi harvest (1970) essay sample



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BUSTER**

Soyinka was born in 1934; he is a Nigerian writer who completes his study in Ibadan University. Soyinka has played an active role in Nigeria's political history and reflects the reality of his nation after independence. Soyinka deals with fictional African place called Isma where power moved from the old tradition order of the Oba to the modern order of Kongi.

Kongi is already a ruler who feels that he has to legitimate his power and to be benevolent in the eyes of his people. In the "harvest festival", Kongi wants Oba to show publicly that he is the ruler by presenting the new yams to him.

There are a group of younger people against Kongi's rule led by Daodu, son of Sarumi, and Segi who was once the mistress of Kongi. Kongi arrested Segi's father and other people who opposed his power and put them in the jail. Kongi now wants to make a deal with this group that if they allowed the festival to happen calmly then he will release all these prisoners including Segi's father. Here, Kongi is a hypocritical because he intends to kill them after getting the agreement for his leadership from Oba.

On the day of festival, Oba offered the 1st crop of the year to Kongi but instead of yam there is a cut head of Segi's father. Accordingly, there was complete chaos and Oba was killed during this chaos. So, all the perfect planning of Kongi about this festival is totally destroyed and the festival turns to violence instead of benevolence. Thus, the harvest of Kongi was the hatred of people and violence because violence brings violence. This play can be interpreted as a play of post-independence and what happened in more African countries not only in Nigeria. It can be the harvest of

colonization or the universal desire to get power. Kongi's rule established by force and fear, so he seeds violence and harvests the hatred of people.

Soyinka's aim is to confirm the idea of democracy and not the using of power in the rule.

There is a conflict in the play between traditionalism and modernism. Oba represents the traditions while Kongi represents the modernism and absolutism. Kongi is a modernized leader but he includes traditions in his rule because no country without traditions therefore he asked the traditional leader, Oba, to give him yam in a traditional day. Thus, Kongi's dictatorship is a political strategy to remain in power at the expense of the people's freedom so like nowadays leaders.

As a dictator, Kongi grabs the rule from the rightful ruler of Isma who is Oba and uses every mean possible, not all of them honest, to attain his goal. He tries to keep his country's cultural roots intact by forcing his officials to wear traditional African clothing. He uses force without any kind of toleration and wherever is taken by force it will finally turn to destruction so as Kongi's policy of Isma.

The people of Isma do not enjoy the day of festival because they lose their power and identity by the oppressed acts of Kongi. Kongi follows only one system which is absolutism i. e. not permit to anyone to show an opinion and he is always shouting and showing his politics proudly, this is why he is dealt as a dictator. The opening scene of the play is with prologue called "Hemlock". The singers of Hemlock do not sing in praise of Kongi as it should but to criticize him as a dictator over his people. In this song Sarumi, a junior

Oba, expresses his loyalty to Oba while Oba in the jail according to the attendance of his spirit. The Hemlock includes three points: -

- 1- Oba and Daodu are convicted by force.
- 2- Kongi's umbrella does not make any shade i. e. Kongi does not protect his people, but only concerns to his power.
- 3- Oba and Daodu do not agree or support that Kongi becomes the new ruler.

BACKGROUND OF THE STORY

As Moore (1978) emphasized, the play was directed by the dramatist himself in 1965 at the Federal Palace Hotel at Lagos, it is a scathing frontal attack on power mongers. A representative of African dictatorship at its worst and a megalomaniac to the core, Kongi resolves to usurp the spiritual authority of the traditional rulers-Oba Danlola so as to ensure total religious-political control over the subjugated populace. The play ends on an enigmatic note: an uprising against Kongi, resulting in Danlola and his entourage taking to their heels.

THE THEMES IN KONGI'S HARVEST

The themes from the play as depicted are summarized below: 1. The clash between the modern and the traditional forces of the modern African society (the central theme) 2. Eclipsing the forces of tradition

3. A protracted struggle for power
4. The propaganda and paraphernalia of dictatorship
5. Confusion
6. Lust for power
7. Vanity
8. Corruption: features of the contemporary society

ANALYZING THE THEME(S)

The themes above as listed are further analyzed using the thematic patterning. This explains “ the distribution of recurrent thematic concepts and moralistic motifs among the various incidents and frames of a story” (Raymond, 2002). Thematic patterning may be arranged so as to emphasize the unifying arguments or salient ideas which disparate events and disparate frames have in common. **THEME 1: THE CENTRAL THEME**

THE CLASH BETWEEN THE MODERN AND THE TRADITIONAL FORCES IN A MODERN AFRICAN SOCIETY The clash manifests itself from the very start in the Hemlock section. There the roll of drums and the anthem suggests the struggles of two opposing camps for supremacy: For: Ism to ism for ism is ism

Of isms and isms on absolute ism

To demonstrate the tree of life

Is sprung from broken peat

And we the rotten bark, spurned

When the tree swells its pot

The mucus that is snorted out

When Kongi's new race blows

Which is to create a new oppositional force (p 11; p 9)

THEME 2: ECLIPSING THE FORCES OF TRADITION

This eclipsing of the forces is what is being mourned for by the opening dirge in “ Hemlock”. The king's umbrella can no longer shade them and this is seen as signaling the end, for as the Ogbo Aweri laments: This is the last

That we shall dance together

This is the last the hairs

Will lift on our skin

And draw together

When the gbedu rouses

The dead in Oshogbo

Also see (page 8)

THEME 3: A PROTRACTED STRUGGLE FOR POWER

For though the end of the traditional ruler's public role has been affected, it is by no means the end of the struggle. He still has mystical powers, dignity and symbolic values all of which Kongi and his henchmen could give anything to get. Their complaints about the royal canopy taking too much silk and that the first of " the new yams melted/melted first in an Oba's mouth" is a symbol of the greed if not envy leading leaders on to capturing all the titles and prestigious roles and have them bestowed upon themselves. But Oba Danlola maintains an uncompromising position and thus refuses to perform the ritual handing over of the first yam to him. This is suggested in these strings of proverbs: The pot that will eat fat

The bottom must be scorched

The squirrel that will long crack nuts

Its footpad must be sore

The sweetest wine has flowed down

The tapper's shattered show

Also see (p 7)

THEME 4: THE PROPAGANDA AND PARAPHENALIA OF DICTATORSHIP

Kongi demonstrates a distrust of almost everyone around him. Through coercion, he buys over all authority and traditional legitimacy all of which he then ungrudgingly bestows on himself. The traditional ruler, Danlola, is therefore compelled to present him personally with the new yam. This will publicly acknowledge his supremacy and enable him to stamp his image on every mind as a charismatic and legitimate ruler. Even his opponents are thus constrained to beg for forgiveness. A dictatorship is thus exposed as a fragile, hollow, fake and weak institution that lacks belief in itself. It therefore has to lean on the legitimacy of the traditional power it seeks to destroy. But since they are afraid of its strength and efficacy they have to muzzle it and absorb all its strength to survive. As a result, the traditional is being strangled by the propaganda and paraphernalia of Kongi's dictatorship. A flurry of "isms" suffocates the air in demonstrating that Kongi's "tree of life" is sprung from broken peat; and that Danlola and in forces of tradition are only its waste products (p2). Amidst the trumpeting of propaganda, the people become as useless as putrid waste matter. Words are bandied in total defiance of them. For in the words of Danlola and his followers' song: There is a harvest of words

In a penny newspaper

They say it all on silent skills

But who cares? Who but a lunatic

Will bandy words with boxes

With government rediffusion sets

Which talk and talk and never

Take a lone word in reply (p 2)

THEME FIVE: CONFUSION

The presentation of Kongi and his men is a biting satire of the modern dictators in Africa as well as elsewhere. The dictator, Kongi, maintains total control over all the instruments of coercion. There are well established and manifested in the mallet-swinging carpenters' brigade and in the superintendent who tyrannizes over the oba. Their repressiveness is a constant concern for the oba as is evident in his speech here: Their yam is pounded, not with the pestles

But with the stamp and a pad of violent ink

And their arms make omelet of

Stubborn heads, via police truncheons (p 57)

And this is conformed in the words of their anthem:

We spread the creed of Kongism

To every son and daughter

And heads too slow to learn it

Will feel our mallets' weight (p 65)

The reformed Awerrri are the instruments of intellectual as well as spiritual repression, thus fulfilling the role of a propaganda machinery geared towards imprisoning the minds of the citizens into seeing things the administration's way. The one address of the information system had already been hinted at in the Hemlock section: Who but a lunatic

Will bandy words with boxes

With government rediffusion sets

Which talk and talk and never

Take alone word in reply

A closer glimpse at their emptiness is in the first part of the play. We hear them expressing their commitment to manufacturing an image to dress up and cover the regimes' ugly face. All they are preoccupied with is in selling out platitudes that are pleasant to the ears of those in power. This in effect exposes the big gulf between the image African dictatorship present of themselves from what they are in real fact; when not lying or deceiving the public they are engaged in superficialities (p 12). THEME 6: LUST FOR POWER

Then likening himself to Christ, Kongi wants his name along with the forthcoming harvest festival to mark the beginning of a new calendar with everything else dating from it. This quest leads him to equating himself to God. State bodies therefore work hard towards elevating their leader to a godhead and the praise song of the carpenter's brigade compares Kongi to Christ by calling him a savior whom they will sweat endlessly for. For Kongi is our father

And Kongi is our man

Kongi is our mother

Kongi is our man

And Kongi is our savior

Redeemer, prince of power

For isms and for Kongi

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We are proud to live or die (p 65)

So much does it become that Danlola cries out in disgust:

Will there not be six times

At the least when we must up and bow

To Kongi (p 55)

THEME SEVEN: VANITY

Kongi's image boosting is directed at impressing the outside world. He thus creates an attractive coat to hide his monstrous form inside. In it he poses in a wide range of postures for the foreign correspondents to paint a glowing portrait of himself abroad. Such captivating captions all add up into the desired effect: A leader's temptation...agony on the mountain

...the loneliness of the pure

...the uneasy head...a saint at twilight...

The spirit of the harvest...the face of

Benevolence...the giver of life (p 39)

An image of a pensive and devoted leader is thus sold out. But no one at home is fooled. Even in granting reprieve he resorts to propaganda. For this much emphasis is on the timing and pacing. Through biting satire Soyinka registers his distaste for such ugly aspects of modern society. We must make it a last-minute reprieve. It will look better that way, don't you think? (p 40)

Unfortunately, imprisonment and death are available to repress those who fail to understand and behave themselves. New offences continually created.

Those present at Segi's and Daodu's protests are therefore easily liable to being charged with treason for " to be there at all at that/disgraceful

exhibition is to be guilty of treasonable/conspiracy et cetera, et cetera (p

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85). The jail is thus only one step towards the grave. For an ignoble death is the ultimate fate of every detainee. One's struggle to hold on to life, by escaping through the prison walls, leads therefore to a life pension being offered to the one who brings him back dead or alive. And the radio has put out a prize

Upon his head. A life pension
For his body, dead or alive. That
Dear child, is a new way to grant
Reprieve. Alive, the radio blared,
If possible; and if not, DEAD! (p 62)

The secretary and the fifth Awerri further substantiate the regime's denial of life: Secretary: You don't know how he hates those men

He wants them dead—you've

No idea how desperately.

Fifth Awerri: I do. But tell him he can kill them later in

Detention

THEME EIGHT:

CORRUPTION: FEATURE OF THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

The organizing secretary displays much ease and skills in operating in the code of the corrupt. Though at first he appears as quite a dutiful and upright executive, one of the Awerri's later reports his abuse of the privileges of his office. In exchange for money, he gives detainees under his charge all comforts. He receives as well huge bribes from visitors to the president and much financial gain through organizing the harvest. This is all part of the syndicates to which the Awerris themselves are a party as seen in the First

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Awerri's eagerness to have his own share: " Has anyone been accepting money on my behalf?

All I ask is my cut" (p 26)

CONCLUSION

The end of the play leaves no hope in us for the purging of such societies. The struggle by Daoudu and others to overcome Kongi's destruction is doomed. This futility of action is first hinted in the proverbs from " Hemlock" earlier quoted. Even Daodu and Segi who are the only ones courageous enough to openly condemn Kongi's rule, are in the end victims of the predicted general clampdown indicated by the iron grating that clamps on the ground at the end of the play.