

Colonialism's Appearance in The End of "*Death and the Kings Horseman*"

In Soyinka's "*Death and The Kings Horseman*" the play centers around a dead King's "horseman" and his struggle to fulfill his duties as the king's horseman. A king's horseman per Yoruba tradition must commit a ritual suicide when his king dies. In the play, Simon Pilkings, the district officer of Oyo, arrests Elisin, the king's horseman of the play to stop him from committing this ritual suicide. Elisin prior to his arrest struggled with the idea of killing himself for the ritual due to his love for life. His religious tradition is seen as barbaric and savage by the British colonizers and those unaffiliated with the religion throughout the play making the practice taboo. (Important note: this essay does not appeal to the morality of suicide rather the implications of this ritual suicides importance to its people)

Yoruba is a mythology that centers around a group of gods and goddesses called Orishas. Yoruba is an ancient central belief system that still exists in West Africa, and followers of this religion base many of their life events around these Orishas. The tradition of ritual suicide in Soyinka's play is an outdated practice, however, is deep rooted in Yoruba culture. In this tradition, when a king dies, honorary suicides take place with various members of the royal family, including wives of the king and family members. Additionally, those with cloth marks called "death cloths" are to kill themselves to help the into the afterlife. Although outdated, it is important to note that many of the customs and rituals in Yoruba tradition are labeled as taboo or dark, and in the play labeled as barbaric. Another example of a Yoruba tradition being labeled as such is Voodoo, which originated in West Africa and is misunderstood due to negative media portrayals, seen as a dark art rather than a religious tradition.

The key factor to the taboo nature of the Yoruba traditions was the colonization of West Africa. The Yoruba people had an established government with a set chief or king and elders. This structure of government was predominantly ruled by indigenous men. Another important note to the structure of Yoruba government is the age grade system. Members of the Yoruba culture were classed based on age and this system “religiously maintained until the advent of Nupe imperialism” (Mathew, 6). After colonization, the government of the Yoruba people was decentralized. The Nupe people were a neighboring group of people that invaded and imperialized the Yoruba, and while they took away most functions of their government, religion and some of the preestablished governmental systems remained. It wasn’t until the British colonization of Nigeria and West Africa that major changes occurred, and the Yoruba people’s government was turned upside down and the customs made taboo. The British colonial rule of Nigeria saw the British take a remote position in the governing of the country and all the groups of people within it. The governments of these people of diverse religions remained within their communities but the English oversaw them and grouped them into single emirates, mashing together people of Muslim, Islam and Yoruba background. These Emirates didn’t last, as the British believed this decentralization of all these indigenous governments wasn’t enough of a hold in the country. The English then divided up the countries into manageable communities and districts and permitted Warrant Chiefs to rule over them, along with small police forces and councils there to keep the people of West Africa “subdued”

Soyinka's play's central theme mimics this idea that colonialism completely alters societies, and the newly established societies alienate the old. Pilkings, the commissioner of the English District, has the goal of stopping Elisin’s ritual suicide and ultimately damning the sacred and ancient religious tradition. Speaking to one of the elder women of the Yoruba

community in the play, Iyaloja, the topic of colonization is brought up unsubtly in reference to Pilkings. She states, “White one, you have a king here, a visitor from your land. We know of his presence here. Tell me, were he to die would you leave his spirit roaming restlessly on the surface of earth?” (Soyinka, 50). This conversation comes about as Iyaloja is interrupted while speaking to Elisin as he is being kept under guard. “White one” is what Elisin and Iyaloja refer to Pilkings as, which indicates the level of racial difference between colonizer and colonized. Further to the notion of difference, the similarity is drawn of having a king. The difference between the king of the English and the King of the Yoruba goes beyond race. Cultural and governmental differences lie in this strained similarity.

Pilkings responds to this question with “Yes. But we don’t make our chiefs commit suicide to keep him company.” (Soyinka, 50) Pilkings completely fails to see the message she was trying to deliver and rather takes it on the blunt end of the extremity. She was simply attempting to get the significance of this ritual through to Pilkings which he completely deflects, undermining the value of it being done. Act 5 of the play really drives through the importance of this ritual suicide and the weight Elisin is stuck under. To wrap around to Pilkings being a metaphor of colonialism, under all this weight Elisin is under of literally being pleased into suicide and his whole society thinking of him as abusing his position he is imprisoned and made helpless by the white man. By the end of the act, Pilkings says “(in a tired voice): Was this what you wanted?” in reference to Elisin killing himself in his prison cell. This line resonated with me as a lack of care for both the life or the death of Elisin. The unenthusiastic nature of his quip made it seem like this religious custom that happened right before him and that he was just ready for it to be over. The complete lack of care can symbolize colonialisms effect on existing non-

Christian religions and associated rituals. To the English who now occupy Nigeria this was all just a nuisance to be put in the past.

Throughout the play, colonialism appeared many places around the Yoruba people. In the end of the play, all of this simmered down into the final act. The whole ritual suicide was completely halted due to the “white man” and would only be completed due to a complete lack of care for the ritual and the life of the prisoner held. The Yoruba have a history of being victims of colonization and dissolution of pre-existing religions and societal structures and this play was rich with examples.

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