



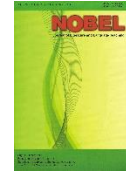
UIN SUNAN AMPEL
SURABAYA

NOBEL

Journal of Literature and Language Teaching

Volume 12, Number 2, September 2021, 158-167

available at <http://jurnalfahum.uinsby.ac.id/index.php/nobel/article/view/377>



DOI: 10.15642/NOBEL.2021.12.2.158-167

THE GENESIS AFRICAN IDENTITY CRISIS THROUGH WOLE SOYINKA'S *DEATH AND KING'S HORSEMAN*

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Article Info

Article History:

Received March 2021

Accepted August 2021

Published September 2021

Keywords:

Africa, Colonialism,
Culture, Identity, West

The main thrust of this study was to explore the genesis of the African identity-crisis from the (pre) colonial times to the postcolonial age. The colonialists revolutionized the cultural backdrop of Africa and imposed European values upon African natives. This affected the social, economic, and political identities in Africa. Today, the imagination of identity-crisis in the African continent is appalling. Notwithstanding her potential to grow socio-economically and politically due to the dispensation of emancipation, Africa is still at the periphery of identity-crisis. This qualitative paper argued that the jeopardy of African culture bred identity crisis in the contemporary states of Africa that hinders the continent from progressing. The hegemony of Europeans threatened to bring African culture to a dead end. This is exemplified by Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, which mirrors the propagation of Western ideologies that Africans ultimately became infatuated with to a degree of perceiving their own culture as unsophisticated. This is developed through the wilful relinquishment of African cultural practices because of European intervention.

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p-ISSN 2087-0698

e-ISSN 2549-2470

INTRODUCTION

The downfall of colonialism galvanized the African independence movement to rediscover African identity. In the heart of the quest to reconstruct Africa lay the aim to revive and preserve the African cultural identities that the colonial undertones virtually dismantled during the imperial era. Despite the dispensation of independence and autonomous efforts, African societies are yet to rehabilitate and re-essentialize their cultural identities, which the colonialists eroded. The continent is still plagued by the enduring legacies of colonialism which stigmatize Africanism. For instance, Montle (2020) finds that most African women today subscribe to Eurocentric ideals of beauty at the expense of Afrocentric depictions of beauty in an effort to attain social class, attractiveness, and privilege. Hence, they resort to skin whitening. This is a brainchild of colonialism that still domineers today as Western identities were glorified and African identities degraded during the colonial era. The colonialists engaged in the supremacy and repression of African culture with no efforts to dialogue with it as “it was simply discarded as backward, primitive and lack any positive value to warrant any serious consideration. African cultures were disparaged as barbaric, primitive, irrational, and debased” (Anyaehe, 2013, p. 151).

The coercion of alien identities upon African natives engendered an African identity crisis. The genesis and unfolding of this African identity crisis are reflected in Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* through the Western molding of Yoruba customs and rituals, of which, Sudha (2004, p. 245) claims, “they demonstrate the possibilities for articulating resistance to colonialism.” The city of Yoruba in the story is portrayed as a cultural and spiritual world that believes in rituals and supernatural powers. The ceremonial rituals in the play that resonate with African identities, such as cultural dances, music, incantatory and metaphorical language, elucidate this. Furthermore, Soyinka divulges the dawn of the African cultural identity crisis through the invasion of European forces in Africa that instigated a clash of cultural identities (Yoruba vs. British culture). This study will be a textual appreciation of Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*. Based on this study, Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* is relevant as a lens through which the threshold of African identity crisis could be conceptualized.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The transition from pre-colonial Africa to colonial Africa and eventually postcolonial Africa marks a major development in terms of the shift of cultural identities in the continent.

This section gives a strong focus on the origin and future of African culture. Furthermore, ancient Africa is better known and commemorated through its distinguished culture. This involves Africans' means of survival in the olden days such as farming, gathering, herding, and hunting, of which still contribute towards the economic growth of Africa: "even though Agriculture is believed to be one of the mainstays of Africa's achievement of the Sustainable, there are enormous challenges that have to be overcome if Africa can fully tap into agriculture's potential" (Ahenkan & Osei-Kojo, 2014, p. 165). Equally important, art is another epitome of ancient African culture. Fleming & Falola (2005, p. 134) identify iron as one of the artistic elements rich in African history: "the use of iron tools marks the significant moment of African civilization. Iron tools enhanced weaponry, allowed groups to clear and manage dense forests, plow fields for farming, and basically better everyday lives."

Some of the examples that epitomize African identity are traditional masks. According to Encarta (2009), masks have secured an essential place in the rituals practiced by many societies in the world. In most cases, these masks are worn by hunters, spiritualists, and dancers. The masks are believed to be in possession of supernatural powers. In support of this point, Encarta (2009) affirms that "the dancer who wears a mask in a ceremony is frequently believed to be transformed into or possessed by the spirit inhabiting or represented by the mask."

Sociological approach

The study crystallizes the African identity crisis through the lens of Soyinka's *Death and King's Horseman*. From a sociological perspective, the selected narration reflects the African society and its challenges that come to grips with identity. Giddens (2006, p. 25) notes that "specifically, the sociological imagination involves an individual developing a deep understanding of how their biography is a result of a historical process and occurs within a larger social context." Moreover, the identity of an individual, group, or society pivots on various factors that comprise characteristics, culture, religion, meaning, reactions, perceptions, and societal attitudes. The advent of colonialists in the African continent instigated a re-assertion and re-subscription to the identity that Africans embraced prior to imperialism. The pre-colonial African identities often portray firm credence in cultural rituals and ancestral worship. *Death and King's Horseman* imagines and reimagines the African life before and after contact with alien qualities that the colonialists imposed. The interface between the African and Western identities resulted in a cultural identity crisis. The conqueror enforced his legacy while the conquered suffered a loss of his aboriginal identity and culture. Giddens (2006, p. 25) states that "sociological imagination is an outlook on life that tries to break away

from the monotony of day to day life.” The attainment of independence, which saw the reinstatement of power to the previously colonized, inspired efforts to break away from the socio-cultural and psychological identities molded by the colonial influence. Hence, this study examines identity-crisis in African societies using a literary mirror to conceptualise the problem.

The Clash of African and Western cultural identities

The intervention of colonial powers in the ancient city of Yoruba gave birth to seemingly perpetual colonial legacies. Prior to the arrival of the British office in Yoruba, the city exulted in its culture and values that underpinned their identity and sense of belonging. However, the advent of the colonialists changed the landscape of Yoruba. New identities from the Western perspectives were introduced to the people of Yoruba, to which some of the African natives yielded. When Pilkings manipulated Elesin to regard his cultural obligation of sacrificing himself as absurd, he gave in but later regretted his actions: “You did not save my life, District Officer. You destroyed it” (Soyinka, 1975, p. 204). This marks the acquisition of European cultural identities by some of the African natives. By influencing Elesin to turn his back from his cultural duty, Pilkings believes that he has saved his life. However, Elesin cannot salve his guilty conscience as he realizes that he has failed his people and lost a son, Olunde. It is Olunde who performed the sacrificial death on behalf of his father, Elesin, in an effort to preserve his African cultural identity.

The onset of European elites in the Yoruba world initiated a clash of identities. Western motivation posited Elesin in the heart of African and Western identities. Bakay (2015, p. 514) asserts that “Elesin is always surrounded by a crowd. His identity is defined by his relations with other people.” Elesin’s identity as the king’s horseman comes with the responsibility of committing suicide after the death of the king.

Nevertheless, Elesin refuses to sacrifice himself and “rejects the communal Yoruba values” Bakay (2015, p. 511). He notes: “my powers deserted me. My charms my spells, even my voice lacked strength when I made to summon the powers that would lead me over the last measure of earth into the land of the flashless...” (Soyinka, 1975, p. 68). The story demonstrates a dissent between African and European cultures. Pilkings views Elesin’s self-sacrifice as a savage and vicious practice: “If they want to throw themselves off the top of a cliff or poison themselves for the sake of some barbaric custom what is that to me? If it were ritual murder or something like that, I’d be duty bound to do something. I can’t keep an eye on all the potential suicides in this province” (Soyinka, 1975, p. 31).

Gargati (2010, p. 42) asks the question: “why won’t they question the logic behind such an act of barbarism?” Olunde’s words: “No, I am not shocked, Mrs. Pilkings. You forget that I have now spent four years among your people. I discovered that you have no respect for what you do not understand” (Soyinka, 1975, p. 192) point out the height of the conflict between his culture (African) and Mrs. Pilkings’ (European). Based on the quarrel above, it is blatant that Mrs. Pilkings and Olunde cultures are at war and therefore have distinct views. Mrs. Pilkings anticipated Olunde to have the same view as hers based on Elesin’s suicidal ritual because he received education in Europe. However, Olunde lingered firm when it came to his African identity. Thus, he disappointed Mrs. Pilkings, who thought that Olunde’s stay in Europe would have him relinquish the African identity and embrace the West’s: “Don’t make it so simple Mrs. Pilkings. You make it sound as if when I left, I took nothing with me” (Soyinka, 1975, pp. 53-54).

The colonizer deemed the Yoruba culture as peculiar and therefore introduced Christianity to uphold a firm influence upon the African natives. Sudha (2004, p. 282) asserts that “through Simon Pilkings we see the attempt of the colonizer to undervalue the religion of the natives over Christianity. This was the first step towards cultural colonialism.” Pilkings berates the rituals that the people of Yoruba perform and believes that his Christian religion is worthy of being practiced. He states: “Now Joseph, on the honour of a Christian-what is supposed to be going on in town tonight?” (Soyinka, 1975, p. 167). However, Crow & Banfield (1996, p. 82) argue that “the colonialists... while being horrified at what they can only understand as native barbarism, fail to recognise that they are ritualists too and are themselves embroiled in actions that others might find senseless and barbaric.” Olunde shamed Mrs. Pilkings as he declined to take a stand beside the Western perspective:

The death of Olunde, Elesin’s son, having returned from Britain on completion of his medical studies is not accidental. It is deliberately tailored to smear Western hallowed profession, which is medicine. That, despite encomiums that would have been showered on Olunde because of his achievement, it is considered worthless in the face of African culture and tradition (Gargati, 2010, p. 42).

Despite receiving Western education, Olunde maintains his honor for the Yoruba culture and takes his father’s responsibility to commit suicide to ascend the spirit of the king to eternal life. Elesin’s son, Olunde, was unsuccessfully persuaded to champion Eurocentric thoughts and stereotypes against African cultural identities. The Pilkings had thought Olunde’s stay in Europe for a more extended period had shaped his reaction, attitude, and perception in life. However, he firmly held on to his heritage.

DISCUSSION OF THE MAIN THEMES

The researcher has relied on a textual analysis method to interpret, examine and understand the foundations of the African identity crisis through Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. The findings from the narration above are presented and discussed in line with the objective of this study which is to explore the genesis of the African identity crisis.

In Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, prior to the invasion of the city of Yoruba by the British influence, the people of Yoruba embraced their African cultural identities devoid of Western inspiration. Elesin, as the Horseman, is both "the mediator between the dead and the living as well as mediation itself" (Soyinka, 1975, p. 84) and, therefore, is compelled to commit a ritual suicide subsequent to the King's death, according to the Yoruba culture. Nevertheless, the presence of British powers in the city of Yoruba quivered the identity of the African natives. Iyaloja's words: "I warned you, if you must leave a seed behind, to be sure it is not tainted with curses of the world. You have betrayed us. We fed you sweet meats such as we hoped, awaited you on the other side, but you said No; I must eat the world's leftovers" (Soyinka, 1975, p. 210), express disappointment towards Elesin as failed to fulfill his duty as a result of European intervention. It is the colonial administrator, Simon Pilkings who perceives Elesin's spiritual obligation as nonsensical, illegal, and nothing but murder:

Jane: "You mean a ritual murder?"

Pilkings: "Must be. You think you've stamped it all out. But it is always lurking under the surface somewhere" (Soyinka, 1975, p. 26).

Consequently, Pilkings' intrusion ingrained a kernel of rebellion in Elesin's mind as he developed reservations and eventually relinquished his duty to perform the suicidal ritual. Msiska (2007, p. 70) notes that "Pilkings' intervention is not simply a castor of colonial meddling in the indigenous culture, rather it is an external factor that unintentionally strengthens the institution of the carrier instead of undermining it." Pilkings' disregard for the Yoruba culture and desire to stop Elesin from executing his duties validates the colonialists' stereotypical view of Africans and considering them as backward and having "no cultural traditions of their own, no religious, economic or political background worthy of serious attention" (Roscoe, 1977, p. 1). Elesin's veer and reluctance to perform the ritual suicide due to colonial persuasion demeans the African cultural identity. Essentially, rituals are a common practice in African death. King (2013, p. 232) states that "from an African perspective, death is a natural transition from the visible to the invisible spiritual ontology where the spirit, the

essence of the person, is not destroyed but moves to live in the spiritual ancestors' realm." Thus, in *Death and the King's Horseman*, when the king died, a sacrificial death ought to be performed by his equestrian. Moreover, the people of Yoruba in the story upheld the belief that the king's spirit would not ascend to the afterlife if Elesin does not sacrifice himself. Before the colonialists infused Elesin's mind with reservations, he was prepared to perform the suicidal ritual and even made wishes:

Elesin: Who does not seek to be remembered?
 Memory is Master of Death, the chink
 In his armour of conceit. I shall leave
 That which makes my going the sheerest
 Dream of an afternoon. Should voyagers
 Not travel light? Let the considerate traveller
 Shed, of his excessive load, all
 That may benefit the living (Soyinka, 1975, p. 159).

Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata (2014, p. 236) note that "like birth, death is characterized by a series of cultural rituals and rites of passage which at times continue for the duration of the mourning period, as long as the living dead is remembered and continues to influence the actions of the living." The demise of the King in the story brought about ritual practices with Elesin's self-sacrifice being the ultimate one: "Richly, richly, robe him richly, the cloth of honour is *alari Sanyan* is the band of friendship Boa-skin makes slippers of esteem (Soyinka, 1975, p. 156). Elesin is given all the honor he demands. His last duty as the equestrian amongst the people of Yoruba is prized above the responsibilities he has ever performed in his life. Amongst his desires, Elesin was granted a night to spend with a virgin girl who was already betrothed:

Elesin: ... tell me who was that goddess through whose lips I saw the ivory pebbles of Oya's river-bed, Iyaloja, who is she? I saw her enter your stall; all your daughters I know well... her wrapper was no disguise for thighs whose ripples shamed the river's coils around the hills of Ilabi

Iyaloja: she has one step already in her husband's home. She is betrothed.

Elesin: Then honour me. I deserve a bed of honour to lie upon.

...

Elesin: My wish transcends the blotting out of thought in one moment's tremor of the senses. Do me credit. And do me honour. I am girded to the route beyond... let seed that will not serve the stomach on the way remain behind (Soyinka, 1975, pp. 20–21).

The people of Yoruba consented to Elesin's request to have the beautiful virgin he lusted after to be sacrificed in bed. Iyaloja notes: "The voice I hear is already touched by the waiting

fingers of our departed. I dare not refuse... my sons wish is mine. I did the asking for him, the loss can be remedied. But who will remedy the blight of closed hands on the day..." (Soyinka, 1975, p. 2). Thus, Baloyi (2008, p. 90) posits that:

rituals are forms of expressions and connections performed by individuals, groups of people, or communities in communication with the living-dead and the Supreme Being. In traditional African thought of death, the grieving process is characterised by rituals such as the bereaved family members shaving their hair, and the slaughtering of a domestic animal.

The British elites in the Yoruba city criticize the rituals impelled to be performed owing to the death of the king. Pilkings condemns Elesin's responsibility to help the king ascend to eternal life through suicide. When Pilkings discovers that Elesin is set to sacrifice himself from Amusa's report, a man from the Yoruba city who has converted to Christianity, he states:

Jane:... you have learnt to argue I can tell that, but I never said you make sense. However cleverly you try to put it, it is still a barbaric custom. It is even worse it's feudal! The king dies and a chieftain must be buried with him. How feudalistic can you get! (Soyinka, 1975, p. 53)

In line with the above, the African natives and colonialists possessed different views towards death, which conflicted with one another. Thus, Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata (2014: 232) note that "all systems are influenced by, and based on a particular epistemological paradigm consistent with that particular cultural context." In the same manner, Frederick (2009, p. i) remarks:

In Western societies, death has traditionally been seen as the departure of the soul from the body. In this tradition, the essence of being human is independent of physical properties. Because the soul has no corporeal manifestation, its departure cannot be seen or otherwise objectively determined; hence, in this tradition, the cessation of breathing has been taken as the sign of death.

From the experiences reflected in the narration, it is worthy to point out the African societal role that aided the colonialists to occasion an identity crisis. According to *South African History Online* (2005), European forces effortlessly conquered some African societies due to the rivalries amongst the African natives. The colonialists convinced others to join forces with them against other Africans. The victory over African kingdoms menaced African culture as colonialists authorized Western identities upon Africans, including religion, European languages, and leadership. Moreover, Africans such as Amusa in *Death and King's Horseman* adopted Western identities such as converting into the Christian religion that the colonial introduced, thus, engineering identity-crisis. This is also portrayed through Elesin, who

abandoned his Yoruba culture and championed Eurocentric thinking. He ultimately refused to perform the sacrificial deemed it absurd in the same way that the colonialists, Mr. and Mrs. Pilkings, did.

CONCLUSION

Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* reflected on the genesis of the African identity crisis. In essence, whilst the African societies practiced their own customs and values as mirrored in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, the colonial office arrived and introduced a different perception to manipulate Africans. This is demonstrated through Elesin's treachery to his people as he changed his mind concerning his commitment to sacrifice himself. Amongst the colonizer's strategies to outwit the African natives, religion seems to be a "sacred engagement with that which is believed to be a spiritual reality" (Williams, 2008). Through religion, the British office in the Yoruba society established a Western identity in the heart of African culture. This is justified by African natives such as Amusa, who converted to Christianity and served in the British police office. Notably, the African cultural identity crisis emerges from the dawn of the invasion of Africa by colonial powers. Elesin's cultural identity crisis began the moment he relinquished his ultimate duty as the king's horseman. To this note, the British colonial office is the cornerstone of the African cultural identity crisis. Africans were subdued with tactics such as Western religion and values.

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