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## **Tradition vs. Modernity: Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel***

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### **Abstract**

Wole Soyinka has been recognized as one of the most talented of twentieth century writers. This Nigerian writer, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, always emphasizes his Yoruban roots in his works. Soyinka's most popular play, *The Lion and the Jewel*, was published in 1959, just before Nigeria became independent and while Nigerians were debating whether to move into the future or leave their past behind. The focus of this paper is to explain how Soyinka uses character, plot, and structure, including pantomime, to investigate the Nigerian conflict between modernity and tradition. This paper was written as a research assignment in English 1023H, Introduction to Literature for Honors Students. It is a response to one of the prompts given to the class asking that modernity and tradition be compared in reference to *The Lion and the Jewel*.

### **Key Terms:**

Wole Soyinka; Yoruba; *The Lion and the Jewel*; modernity; tradition; African literature; pantomime

In Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, there is a constant confrontation between tradition and modernity. Soyinka published the play in 1959, when Nigeria was struggling for independence under British control. Nigeria had been united as the "Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria" since 1914 and by the late 1950s was facing the challenge of whether or not it was ready for independence and capable of handling modern Western civilization. Some Nigerians felt that it was time for change while others wondered if they should move from their present culture. In this paper, I relate modernity to the influence of British culture during the 1940s and 1950s on Nigerian ways of life. I relate tradition to Nigeria's traditional Yoruban culture. The main characters of the drama—Sidi, Lakunle, and Baroka—all exhibit internal and external conflicts with modernity and tradition. The battle between Lakunle and Baroka for Sidi's hand in marriage is the main plot of the play and reveals a confrontation between their two ways of life.

With Western civilization's influence advancing into Soyinka's Nigeria, the village school teacher, Lakunle, has become more fond of the modern way of life and wants the village of Ilujinle to back away from tradition as well. This task is not made easy because villagers refuse to put aside their Yoruban roots and traditions. The village belle, Sidi, and the village Bale, Baroka, stand for tradition. In Yoruban culture, the belle

is the popular, attractive girl amongst the village, and the Bale is the ruler or chief over the people. Sidi, Baroka, and Lakunle all have their modern and traditional standards, but they don't hesitate to use each to their own advantage. The confrontation between Yoruban tradition and modern civilization is evident through the characters, plot, and structure of the drama.

The play's most modern and westernized character is Lakunle, a school teacher who is determined to rid himself and others around him of traditional ways of life. In the opening scene of the play, Lakunle's desire for modernity is obvious in his initial request of Sidi. "Let me take it," he says, seizing a pail of water that Sidi has been carrying on her head (Soyinka 891). This is Lakunle's way of being the "modern gentlemen" and relieving Sidi of her heavy load, as most gentlemen would do today, trying to break the tradition of a woman's task. Lakunle goes on to request her hand in marriage as a Westerner would, but will not pay the bride-price. His rejection of the traditional bride-price is another part of his modern ways. Lakunle is madly in love with Sidi and "offers her a 'Western' monogamous marriage" (Gibbs 307).

Lakunle justifies his refusal to pay the bride-price, saying, "To pay the price would be to buy a heifer off the market stall" (Soyinka 897). James Gibbs, argues that Lakunle "uses or abuses the 'traditional' in accordance with his own needs and situation. Thus he adopts a misinformed Western attitude towards bride-price partially because he is in a bad economic position" (307). Lakunle's Westernized and modern form of courtship is constantly shot down by Sidi's desire to be traditional.

Sidi exhibits her traditional views in her rejections of Lakunle's many modern advances toward her. As mentioned earlier, she enters the first scene carrying a small pail of water in a traditional manner. She denies Lakunle's request to carry the pail for her because she is aware of his motives for doing it. She is aware of his desire to court her in a modern fashion, but will not put aside her values to allow him to do so. Sidi is most adamant about Lakunle paying her bride-price in order to marry her. She makes it clear to him that her declination of his marriage proposal is based solely on his refusal to pay the price, because she would not be a "cheap bowl for the village to spit" (Soyinka 896).

Although Sidi can initially be characterized as a traditional village belle, her character is to be reexamined when she learns of her own beauty. With European technology coming into the village, a glossy picture of Sidi has been published on the cover and throughout a magazine. This gives Sidi's ego a big boost and makes her traditional platform a little shaky. After the picture is published, the Bale, Baroka, requests that she become his youngest wife. Sidi declines the more traditional choice of being his last wife (and later the senior wife after Baroka's death), but demonstrates modern thoughts by saying that Baroka is too old and unattractive. She does not look at the marriage as a convenience, but more as her being famous and happier without him.

Baroka portrays himself as a strictly traditional, Yoruban ruler and is determined to keep his village the same way, but he later reveals his transition into modernity. His first display of displeasure with modern ways of life takes place in his first appearance in

the play. Baroka enters a scene where a pantomime, which is movement and action without words, is taking place, and all in attendance, except Lakunle, give a traditional kneel and greeting of "Kabiyesi, Baba." This is a Yoruban greeting used to address a ruler and Baroka is upset when he gets a simple "good morning" from Lakunle. In his anger, Baroka begins to question why he is not getting the respect that he expects and deserves.

Baroka's desire to keep tradition in his village is also displayed when he stops Western civilization from spreading to his village. The Public Works attempt to build a railway in Ilujinle, but Baroka is against progress. The Public Works send in workers and surveyors to tear down jungles in order to run a railway through the village. When Baroka learns of this, he pays off the surveyor with money, a coop of hens, and a goat. Pleased, the surveyor and workers pack up their things and leave "convinced" that the tracks were intended to be laid further away. There is no question that Baroka's motive for turning progress away is to preserve his village in its traditional essence.

The overall plot of the play, Lakunle and Baroka's fight for Sidi's love, displays another confrontation between tradition and modernity. Between the two of them, Sidi has to choose between having a modern or traditional marriage. Lakunle's refusal to accept tradition causes modernity to falter. Sidi responds to one of his many proposals stating, "...I shall marry you today, next week or any day you name. But my bride-price must first be paid" (Soyinka 896). This is an obvious indication that if Lakunle will only stuck to the traditional bride-price, "the modern man" could have had his bride. His choice for modernity leaves the door open for Baroka to enter. Knowing the rules of tradition and using Sidi's ego against her, Baroka knows that if he can seduce Sidi, she will not have a choice in marrying him because she will no longer be a maid. This is the battle which causes tradition to triumph over modernity.

Not only is there an external conflict between tradition and modernity, but there is also an internal conflict in all three of the characters. Each of these characters uses both tradition and modernity to their advantage and convenience. As suggested by Gibbs, Lakunle "adopts his misinformed Western attitude" due to the fact that, as a school teacher, he cannot afford to pay Sidi's bride-price. In the middle of the play, Sidi's internal conflict is revealed as well. When she is offered the position of being Baroka's youngest wife, she uses Lakunle's modern ideas about being property by saying, "He seeks to have me as his property where I must fade beneath his jealous hold" (Soyinka 907). Although she is a traditional maiden, she has absorbed the modern idea of not becoming Baroka's property. Baroka's internal conflict is revealed in his use of the stamp machine, which is a western innovation. He uses this technology to persuade Sidi to be with him. Baroka promises Sidi that he will have her face placed on the village stamp which he knows will appeal to Sidi's new egotistical character.

The structure of this play is characterized by the conflict between tradition and modernity as well. Soyinka incorporates his Yoruban traditions throughout the play which creates a minor conflict with one of the characters. In the morning scene of the play while Sidi and Lakunle are talking, a number of dancers and drummers begin a

traditional pantomime and dance. The dancers begin to chant and whirl around Lakunle, trying to encourage him to participate. In his attempt to break away from tradition, Lakunle does not want to participate in the play, but they finally wear him down with their chanting and dancing. Lakunle joins in as they reenact the photographer's first visit to Ilujinle. They take the shape of wheels, and Lakunle acts as the photographer taking numerous pictures of Sidi. Another pantomime takes place towards the end of the play. This dance is a dramatization of women celebrating and mocking the fact that Baroka is impotent. Baroka's head wife, Sadiku, joins in this dance where women are dancing around a comic figure of Baroka, taunting him.

The confrontation between modernity and tradition is incorporated through all the components of Soyinka's drama. Lakunle and Baroka display external conflicts in their battle for Sidi's love. The characters also display internal conflicts when they use both tradition and modernity to their own advantage. Furthermore, the overall plot and structure of the play are indications of this constant conflict. Although this conflict is not the only theme of the play, Soyinka thoroughly incorporates the theme of tradition and modernity.

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