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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE THEME OF HISTORY IN SOYINKA'S AKÉ, THE YEAR OF CHILDHOOD

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ABSTRACT

According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, history is the past events connected with the development of a particular place, subject, etc. Thus the nineteenth century was a period which impacted the history of African countries, between tradition and modernism. There was a mixing of African and European civilization; the latter through the colonization of Africa by Europe brought a lot of changes in African society on the political, economic and social levels. For Europeans, this colonization had positive results in that it allowed them to impose their languages, their cultures and to develop their economies (through the exploitation of human and natural resources). On the other hand, for Africans, this colonization had negative results and many denounced it, particularly writers who, through post-colonial theory, defended Africa during and after colonization. We can cite here Wole Soyinka who in his writings like *Aké, the Years of Childhood* decried this. In **Aké: The Years of Childhood**, Soyinka employs a narrative style to depict a childhood shaped by cultural and religious blending, where African and European traditions, traditional beliefs and Christianity, as well as local and colonial powers, coexist harmoniously.

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INTRODUCTION

Aké The Years of Childhood is a literary narrative work which is not fiction but real. It is the autobiography of Wole Soyinka, the author of the book. Through this work he describes his identity at the same times, he mentions how is his society, the evolution or transformation undergone by this community during the colonization of Nigeria. This event brought tensions between the past and the present (tradition and modernism). How Yoruba society has been affected by western ones. All these events that happened during his childhood, and which have coincided with the Second World War, have been exhibited in *Aké the years of childhood*. The description of these tensions between tradition and modernism is cultural, religious and political. Ce travail utilise la théorie de la Réception (Reader-Response) comme cadre théorique. Cette approche aide le lecteur à interpréter un texte littéraire en fonction de ses propres expériences. L'objectif de l'application de la théorie de la Réception est de susciter la réponse personnelle des apprenants face aux textes littéraires, ainsi que leurs réactions lorsqu'ils interagissent avec ces textes (Elena Spirovska, 2019, p. 24). Néanmoins, la méthodologie utilisée dans cette étude est de nature qualitative, et elle est appliquée de deux façons pour recueillir les données. La première source est constituée du roman *Aké the Years of Childhood*. La seconde comprend des documents critiques tels que des livres, des revues, des travaux non publiés, des sources Internet et des

mémoires. La présente étude circonscrit son analyse à la culture africaine de façon générale et particulièrement de l'usage des langues locales nigérianes. Elle se concentre aussi à la fois sur la religion africaine que le pouvoir politique.

Language/Culture: Wole Soyinka was born in 1934 in Abeokuta, Nigeria. He is from Egba, one Yoruba ethnic group. Aké is the village where the story of his childhood took place at the age of 11 years old. He depicts his family, the houses, the environment and the day to day's life. He makes the reader feel like he or she is concerned and knows the village of Aké.

"Only the school-rooms of the primary school shared this closeness to the woods, and they were empty at night. Fenced by rough plastered walls, by the windowless rear walls of its houses, by tumuli of rocks which the giant trees tried vainly to obscure, Aké parsonage with its corrugated roofs gave off an air of fortifications.(2)"

"In the other lower compound was the mission bookseller. A shriveled man with a serene wife on whose ample back we all, at one time or the other slept, or reviewed the world. His compound became a short cut to the road that led to Ibara. Lafenwa or Igbein and its Grammar School over which Ransome-Kuti presided and lived with his family. The bookseller's compound contained the only well in the

parsonage; in the dryseason . his place was never empty. And his soil appeared to produce the only coconut trees.(4)" Soyinka describes the varieties and qualities of Yoruba food, how rich is Yoruba culture, here is the list of some foods: Akara, Kasada, Tinko, Gbegiri, Akamu Chin-chin, Moin-moin (153,154,155). The use of his Yoruba language shows how much he values his culture. As everywhere in Africa, morality is very important in African society or let say African way of life. It is the element which brings real sense to life as human being and civilized society. A person is taught through proverbs as advice or punishment, for example the girl who urinated on the mat when she was sleeping: to correct her, people humiliated her by singing.

"toolé, toolé a fokoitobori Suulésuuléfokonudi"(soyinka 87)

"And then she came in sight. The offending mat was rolled and borne on her head , the procession went from house to house where a stop was made and the girl had to dance her dance of shame. At eachhouse." (soyinka 87).

This practice is good because it is a moral lesson, it touches the victim psychologically. There is much solidarity in African societies, no difference or segregation, people live together as one family, a children is for everybody not only his or her own parents.

"The bookseller's wife was one of our many mothers: if we had taken a vote on the question . she would be in the forefront of all the others, including our real one." (Soyinka15). "We slept often at the bookseller's. Mrs B would send a maid to inform our house that we would eat and sleep at their own house for the night, and that was that. When we got into trouble we ran behind her and she shielded us: No no, I take the beating on myself." (Soyinka15).

The obedience for the elders is another important point in Yoruba culture for greeting, one has to prostrate himself or herself in front of elders.

"They don't know how to prostrate, please don't take offence." (Soyinka 126)

This is a kind of respect for the elders and the same to ask for forgiveness. Apart from this, if you want to greet your age mate you can shake hand, but you have to be careful because people can do bad things to you.

"Ijebu relations, it seemed. had a reputation for poisoning, or for a hundred and one forms of injuring an enemy through magical means. We were drilled in ways and means of avoiding a handshake, for various forms of injury could be operated through the hands. One would return home and simply wither away. Thus we perfected the technique of bowing with our hands at the back ; the more persistently a chance acquaintance proffered his hands, the more resolutely we kept our hands behind, bowing respectfully and looking permanently on the ground." (Soyinka 130)

To avoid this kind of attack, they use sometimes the scarification.

"But the tears that were forced out in that moment continued unchecked as I gritted my teeth together and forced back every sound. Father's fingers dug into my shoulders as my body contracted with every incision. I could no longer look down. I shut my eyes. glued my teeth together and waited for the end of the ordeal . The tears ran . unchecked .A soothing band encased my ankle. When I looked down I noticed a wide swathe in the mixture of the dish . Binding my ankle now was the strip of cloth which had been soaked in that mixture." (Soyinka 146). Also for food there is a recommendation to think before eating.

"Whoever offers you food, take it. Eat it. Don't be afraid, as long as your heart says, Eat. If your mind misgives, even for a moment, don't take it, and never step in that house again. Do you understand what I have just said?" (Soyinka 147).

In case of fighting the person should be courageous not afraid.

"Wherever you find yourself. Don't run away from a fight. Your adversary will probably be bigger, he will trounce you the first time. Next time you meet him, challenge him again. He will beat you all over again . The third time . I promise you this. you will either defeat him , or he will run away. Are you listening to what I am telling you ?" (Soyinka 147).

With the arrival of white man a new variety of food is brought. "McDonald's hamburgers, Kentucky Fried Chicken, hot dogs and dehydrated sausage-rolls. It has been cooked in emptied milk-tins and similar containers , scooped out and sliced in neat geometric shapes like cakes of soap. And the newly-rich homes stuff it full of eggs, tinned sardines from Portugal and corned beef from the Argentine" (Soyinka 156)

The radio, television, and newspaper propagated new cosmetic product like creams and new music (disco). "Bury corpses of sausage- rolls in their mouths and drown the mash in coca-cola. A girl decides at last on one of several competing brands of 'skin-tone' creams, already picturing her skin bleached lighter." (Soyinka 157).

"The products of a global waste industry-fly-blown shawls, combs, mirrors, flaring radio antennas, chrome or foam-and-rubber motor-car decorations, ornamented flasks, drinking-glasses disguised as floral arrangements, oriental table-mats stamped Manchester. clocks, 'gold' jewellery. photoframes with a backing of white voluptuous bodies" (Soyinka 150)

"They embrace and ostentatiously patronize the new music , barely recognizing the identity of the new 'Fuji', 'Fuji-Rock' , 'apola-disco', 'Afro-Reggae' with their equally vapid precursors." (Soyinka 157)

At the end some of these facilitate social depravation, some attitudes are considered as a disgrace for black people.

"They teach you to say 'Sir' in those schools. Only slaves say Sir. That is one of their ways of removing character from boys at an impressionable age- Sir. sir, sir, sir, sir! Very bad . So you must come and see us during the vacation . . ." (Soyinka 192)

Sexuality appeared in school, girls are getting pregnant.

“But the real scandal came when a senior boy, and a prefect, made a girl pregnant. It was not unusual.” (Soyinka 166)

Religion: The conflict between Christianity and traditional religion was significant because people had difficulty in standing out. Some became Christians and others maintained the egungun, ogun. “ogun protects his own” (Soyinka 140)

“I knew that the egungun were spirits of the dead. They spoke in guttural voices and were to be feared even more than kidnappers. And yet I had noticed that many of them were also playful and would joke with children.” (Soyinka 31)

The worship of egungun is not easy because women are not allowed to come near even though there is a woman who takes the sacrifice on her head.

“Yet this woman, stark naked, with a conspicuous igba ebo on her head had penetrated right up to the walls of the mansion where she would have deposited her evil load but for the vigilance of the night guard. No one knew her, and she would not speak.” (Soyinka 197)

In the book, Wole mentioned an incident that happened and which frightened him during the egungun outing,

“When Reverend J.J. on that day decided to evangelize, the church building collapsed” (9)

“One frightening experience occurred in one of the villages in Ijebu. He had been warned not to preach on a particular day, which was the day for an egungun outing, but he persisted and held a service. The egungun procession passed while the service was in progress and, using his ancestral voice, called on the preacher to stop at once.” (8) Wole’s mother, a wild Christian defender of Christianity, she said;

“The period of faith is gone. There was faith among our early Christians, real faith, not just church-going and hymn-singing. Faith. Igbagb6. And it is out of that faith that real power comes” (Soyinka 7)

Politics: The traditional authority is well organized as regards the Yoruba kingdom before colonization. The colonizer came in Africa to get profit, thus they established a direct debit system of taxation in order to get more money. They do not care about the colonized people.

“They have no heart, those men. They look at you like they have no flesh and blood until you give them what they want. We spent the night in a police cell. They seized all our goods and will continue to hold them until we bring them our tax papers. But we have not even been to the market, how can we pay when they have taken the goods we are going to sell?” (Soyinka 182)

This wicked action pushed the women to protest because apart from the tax for their husbands, the white man created another tax (which is more important than the men tax) for women. They also denounce the silent of the traditional leaders. In addition to the tax policy, there are other negative measurements applied by the white man which is segregation:

“Students should not wear shorts with pockets. Now, why do you think they do that? Why on earth should a young man not have pockets in his shorts? You know, he shook his head in a really worried manner, the white man is a strange creature. In his country, in his own schools—and remember, I visited a number of public schools during our conference—Eton, Harrow etc. well, their boarders wear suits, all with pockets.” (Soyinka 227)

They considered black people inferior to them that is why they did slave trade and drop atomic bomb in Japan. For them, Asian and African people are the same inferior to them.

CONCLUSION

The mix between the past and the present in *Ake* is a good example of cultural conflict where the colonizer stifled, if not almost annihilated, the local culture. This fact is identical everywhere in Africa not only in Yoruba society. And this has created a general alienation which is one of the factors of underdevelopment of the African continent. The West makes us believe that we are not civilized, we have no culture which is not the case because science has demonstrated that Africa is the cradle of humanity and of science itself. Africa must rise up, to promote its cultures, its languages which are the keys to good development.

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