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# Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers:* The Search for Meaning

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**❐ ABSTRACT ❐**

*Wole Soyinka's The Swamp Dwellers outlines the main problems of a family in an African village faced by many problems which are typical of any African community. This study explores the various attitudes of many characters belonging to different generations and social ranks. The dramatist skilfully diagnoses the many ills of both village and city life which hinder the development of individuals particularly in their incessant attempt to search for a meaning in their life among the odds which are imposed on African society.*

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# ساكنو المستنقعات: البحث عن معنى

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## ❐ ملخص ❐

يقدم "وول شونيكا" في مسرحية "ساكنو المستنقعات" عدداً من المشكلات، التي تعانيها أسرة في إحدى القرى الافريقية. وهذه الدراسة محاولة تكشف بعض هذه المشكلات التي تواجه أفراد هذه الأسرة، الذين ينتمون لأجيال متباينة. ويصور "شونيكا" بمهارة بارعة الشرور التي تحيق بالمجتمع الافريقي في كل من الريف والمدينة، من خلال عرضه لشخصيات تنحدر من أصول اجتماعية مختلفة، وهذه الشرور، كما يراها "شونيكا"، هي المسؤولة عن تخلف الفرد في افريقيا، وهي التي تقف حاجزاً منيعاً أمام تطوره، وبخاصة في بحثه الدائب عن معنى لحياته، وسط ما يفرض عليه للقبول بالمفهوم التقليدي للحياة.

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Of all the places on earth which have been exploited by foreign forces Africa undoubtedly suffered the most. Colonisers found in Africa the raw material which they sought, and in order to get access to this material they had to appropriate African countries to their own end and to keep the people there as ignorant as possible so that they may become an easy prey always 'at their disposal'. Many African countries got their independence but remained subject to different forms of colonisation. Consequently African man lost his identity because of the difficulty of having to determine his attitude towards many aspects of life that he found himself trapped in. It is within the scope of these various restrictions which were imposed on him that the African man has to explore the meaning of his life. Very often sensitive individuals found themselves unable to determine their role in life because of the many obstacles which hindered their leading a dignified form of living; therefore their very life can be looked at as a journey in search of the 'truth' which lies beyond their surface existence, a search which enables them to get to the depth of reality in order to achieve creative self realisation.

Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers*(1) very succinctly outlines the main problems of a typical village family in Africa which is torn between superstition and its attempt to assert itself despite the difficulty of leading a meaningful and free life. Although colonisers do not exist in the play yet their trail in the form of ignorance, backwardness and materialism is strongly felt. The dilemma of a sensitive individual like the hero Igwezu is depicted, on the one hand, in his attitude towards materialism as represented in the valueless world of the city, where even brotherhood is discarded, and, on the other hand, in his view of superstition as embodied in the village life particularly through the Kadiye, the priest of the swamp, who, like a fat coloniser, exploits the simplicity and naivety of poor villagers to satisfy his greed. The play leaves the reader in no doubt that the Kadiye will never bother about bringing change or harmony to the disturbed villagers' lives because this is bound to jeopardize his own interest. Indeed, if anything, the Kadiye systematically tries to brainwash the villagers and convince them by hook or by crook that he is the one who is

going to lead them to 'salvation'. Initially Igwezu tries to trust the Kadiye, but to his dismay he discovers that the man is a trickster. This causes his disappointment with conventional and artificial religion, and leads him to a more sincere and honest form of what may be called the religion of the heart, as embraced by the blind begger whose insight could lead him to the truth. The frustration of Igwezu and his disillusionment with the Kadiye broaden his vision and enriche his experience. His change is a symbol of his dissatisfaction with both the past and the status quoe, and of his ability to search for some form of meaning which can free him from all adverse forces, which stand in his way to realise himself, and live creatively.

The beginning of the play introduces an old couple: Makuri "an old man of about sixty" and Alu "his equally aged wife". They sit together and talk; but while Alu expects the return of her son Igwezu from the city, Makuri is anxious "to see if the rain looks like stopping". (p. 81) As the play progresses, two people arrive to the house: a blind beggar and the Kadiye. The blind beggar has come a long way from the north, from "Bukanji ... the village of the beggars", not to beg, but "to work on the soil ... to knead it between his hands". (p. 89) The Kadiye, "the Serpent and Priest of the Swamp", (p. 93) explains the reason for his visit:

> The rains have stopped ... The floods are over ... I am now released of my vow.... When the floods began and the swamps overran the land, I vowed to the Serpent that I would neither shave nor wash until the rains ceased altogether... (p. 96)

Igwezu, one of the two sons who have left the village for the city, returns. He tells his parents about his dispiriting adventure:

> The city reared itself in the air, and with strength of his legs of brass kicked the adventurer in the small of his back (p. 104)

During the brief meeting between the blind beggar and Igwezu a warm relationship begins to grow between them and immediately one understands the other. The prevailing corruption lies, as their dialogue reveals, in the "ineffectiveness" of the traditional faith the Kadiye dictates and in the "greedy forces" of the city. During the course of the play, Igwezu exposes this corruption and finally questions the credibility of the Kadiye; but the play ends without a clear cut answer.

The stage direction is specific in describing the scene:

> The scene is a hut on stilts, built on one of the scattered semi-firm islands in the swamps. Two doors on the left lead into other rooms, and the one on the right leads outside. The walls are marsh stakes plaited with hemp ropes. (p. 81)

This hut where the action of the play takes place is located in "a village in the swamp" threatened by a flood. The atmosphere is ridden with a sense of imminent danger which, as Elderd Jones rightly observes, "reflects the precarious state of the society.(2)

The play clearly presents a study of the African society. In Africa there is the old system represented here by the father Makurie and the mother Alu. There is also the young, epitomized by Igwezu and Awchike. Awchike does not appear in the play, it is true; but his role is quite important. He is the young African who escapes the suffocating atmosphere unscathed. The Kadiye and the blind beggar represent traditional religious and old values. We notice that it is a play of pairs. Soyinka is unaware of this polarity. He intends it to be so.

Martin Banham rightly observes that it is concerned with "a theme familiar to African writing, that of conflict between the new and the old"; but as Mr. Banham remarks it is "a play of foreboding, and illustrates a land where only the locusts reap"(3) Makurie and his wife are the same age; but each has a distinctive tone. The man bears the stamp of a well-experienced person at the schemes, plots and conspiracies of rules and social and religious leaders,

whereas the woman is totally submissive to the group leader and the status: she submits whatever situation arises. She finds it more expedient to serve the Kadiye than to help the blind beggar; while Makurie immediately realizes the difference between the two personalities; there is, to him, a great difference between a religious man and a man with religious pretenses. He asks his wife to wash the feet of the blind beggar, to give him food and hot drinks. Makurie listens to the blind beggar attentively and exchanges speeches with him, thus showing that poverty may conceal innocence and good will, while titles, like that of the Kadiye, hide corruption.

The two sons who leave the village for the city are another example of pairs in Soyinka's play. Awchike could manage handsomely in the city. He married his brother's wife and never returned to the village. He found in the city what he wanted: money. Materialism and civilization, i.e., man-made civilization, suited him. Igwezu, on the other hand, returned to the village. In the city he lost his beautiful wife. He could not find a suitable place to stay in there; he could not find a job nor could earn enough money. His return to the village is little mysterious too; but we understand that he did so to gather and collect his crops. But later we know that his crops have been destroyed presumably by the flood. During this brief stay in the village he meets the Kadiye for the last time, and during the meeting we are also made to understand that the Kadiye, not the flood, is responsible for the destruction of everything good in the village. Igwezu has lost his money, wife and ideal; but he has gained an awareness that makes up for everything he has lost:

> The wound heals quicker if it is left unopened. What took place is not worth memory ... Does it not suffice that in the end I said to myself ... I *have a place, a home,* and though it lies in the slough, I will go back to it.... I have come back with the assurance of one who has lived with his land and tilled if faithfully. (italics mine) (p. 104)

The great loss and the devastating adventure have not blinded Igwezu to the truth or to a quest for meaning. Throughout his journey, his search for meaning, Igwezu has finally come to realize that HOME is the only place where meaning can be found. Awchike, his brother who does not appear in the play, fits into the city: money is his only concern. But Igwezu is still involved in the life of his village. He is not only the touchstone of morality within the African village community, but also the man who will eventually prove that hope and love lie nowhere in the city; but in the village community:

> IGWEZU: ...
>
> When I met with harshness in the city, I did not complain. When I felt the nakedness of its hostility, I accepted it. When I saw knife sever the ties and love of kinship, and turn brother against brother ... (p. 103)

The last pair in the play is Kadiye and the blind beggar. The entrance of the first is accompanied by drums, noise, music and something like military march. The stage directions carefully describe the scene:

> MAKURI: Wait. (He listens for a moment to the drumming which is now just outside the door) ... (Enter Alu running) ... (Alu begins to tidy the room hastily. She takes away Makuri's baskets and rushes, returns to fetch her own things and takes them out of her room. she trims the lamp wicks and takes away any oddments lying around). The drummer is now at the door, and footsteps come up the gangway.
>
> ...
>
> The drummer is the first to enter. He bows in backwards, drumming praises of the Kadiye.
>
> Next comes the Kadiye himself, a big, voluminous creature of about fifty, smooth-faced except for little tufts of bread around his chin. His head is shaved clean. He wears a kind of lion-cloth, white, which

comes down to below kneen and a flap which hangs over left arm. He is bare above the waist. At least half of the Kadiye's fingers are ringed. He is followed by a servant, who brushes the flies off him with a horse-tail flick.)

MAKURI: (places his arm across his chest and bows.): My house is open to Kadiye. You are very welcome. (The Kadiye places a hand on his hand.) (Alu hurries into the room and kneels. The Kadiye blesses her also.)

The Kadiye's entrance introduces a feeling of duty, not altogether ordinary. We feel that this and all other houses in the village have been used to witness the commercial, and experience the procedures they have to follow as the ritual begins. The blind man, on the other hand, enters so quietly that the mother takes him for her son Igwezu. His appearance, words, greetings and behaviour all differ from those of the Kadiye. The latter's are given an air of showing off and arrogance which, from his first appearance, reflects a very irreligious character.

In the society of the village people are exploited in an almost total sense. *The Swamp Dwellers* attacks many aspects of African society, in particular superstitions and their destructive role. In his depiction of the Kadiye Soyinka is launching a modern attack on "the priest who is doing well at the expense of everyone else's misery" as Mr. Anthony Graham rightly observes.(4) (p. 125) The Kadiye, with his ridiculous behaviour and his sense of self-importance is a parody of the religious man, represented by the blind beggar.

The family, the play introduces, represents the whole African society. The members of this family are all victims of the grim and suffocating status quo. The lives of these people are restricted. The Kadiye is so cruel, and vindictive and frightening; the city is mysterious. The Kadiye controls and dominates the lives of this family and other families in the village, and the city leads people through devious roads to the unknown: to death. There is in

the play another indictment of a social disease. The reference to the Kadiye as a "fat man" explains the poverty of the family and accounts for the immigration of the two brothers to the city.

The life of the family, and other families in the village, is also dominated and controlled by the superstition of serpent-flood relationship. The crops of the entire village must be sacrificed to the Serpent' so that it stops the flood at the right time. Greed, economic as well as religious exploitation and soul-destroying superstition are but some of the forces which Soyinka felt to be oppressive of the spirit.

In this short, compelling African drama there are somany social abuses exposed. The Kadiye depends for his success on deceit and trickery. The effect of the soul-destroying greed of the Kadiye is brought to lightinthe course ofthe play. The Kadiye uses the serpent superstition to intimidate the village. These ills and abuses are being attacked as the Kadiye's weapons in his dirty fight against the innocent, naive and traditionalist people of the village.

The natives of the swamps are the peasants who till the land. The Kadiye is never referred to in the play as a person who works. He thrives at the expense' of the villagers: he is a parasite. He cannot belong to the community; he is the exploiter of the community. The Kadiye cannot convince the natives that he is a straightforward or a good leader, and to Igwezu, he is a suspicious hypocrite. He will never convince the villagers that he can bring prosperity, order, peace or harmony to their swamps. During the course of the play, he is never seriously referred to as a holy priest. His actions betray his words and his promise no longer holds any truth.

Soyinka is digging deep at the roots of the sickness of his society: the failure of superstition to give any satisfactory meaning to life and the inability of materialism (city life) to be: me a healthy alternative to tradition. What he pmposcs in his play is, certainly, the rejection of both materialism and superstition, and the search, through African life and tradition and through modern civilization, for a new humanism where the African individual of modern Africa can fit in. Any hopes for the future are embodied by Igwezu and

the blind man: the one represents the young generation as a proposed alternative to the generation the city consumes, the other stands for the healthy aspect of religion, a religion of love that embraces all humanity as opposed to a religion built by power on baseless superstitions.

The search for a new morality –a new meaning – is therefore substantiated by Igwezu's principles shown clearly in his sharp questions and statements. It is also to be found in the sudden presence of the blind man resembles to a large extent the messenger in early Greek drama. He comes to the village without any previous preparation; but not without a message. His message is presented several times during a very short period. He does not accept charity, (p. 94) and he believes in a God who loves and forgives:

> DEGGAR: (smiling still): but I was a child, and I knew that I had committed no sins. Moreover, my faith promises paradise for all true believers – paradise in the company of Muhammad and all the prophets ... (p. 90)

Earlier, we also heard him say that he had come to "work" not to beg. The Kadiye is a "fat" man, he decides; he "detected a certain bulk in his voice". (p. 101) When the Kadiye returns the blind man sarcastically tells Igwezu: "master, I think the Serpent approaches." (p. 105) But when he talks about work, the blind man's tone is so serious, impressive and penetrating:

> BEGGAR: I am a wanderer, a beggar by birth and fortunes. But you own a farm. I have stood where your soil is good and cleaves to the toes like the clay of bricks in the mixing; but it needs the fingers of drought whose skin is parchment. I shall be your bondsman. I shall give my self to you and work the land for your good. I feel I can yield in my hands an obedient child. (p. 101)

The blind man and the Kadiye are both representative of religion. The blind beggar is poor and thin and his language is closer to the language of the holy scriptures; the Kadiye is obese and rich, and his language bears a threatening tone; it is the language of approaching awe and crawling calamities waiting behind the door, the language of the tyrant:

> KADIYE: (panting): You shall pay for this ... I swear I shall make you pay for this ... Do you think that you can pour your sacrilege into my ears with impunity? (p. 110)

This contrast highlights the role of the blind man as a messenger preaching a new morality. His message operates on two levels: social and religious. The religious message shakes the foundations of the Kadiye's heretic superstitions, the social message is delivered implicitly by his desperate insistence on work despite his knowledge of the Serpent's rights.

Igwezu's struggle is a fight to fit in; he is willing to free his village and the minds of his people from the powerful grip of the Kadiye's superstitions. He succeeds in revealing the truth about the crooked and evasive character of the Kadiye, while he shaves the Kadiye's beard of his father, the barher of the village. Igwezu pronounces his hidden intentions. He is quite vociferous and demonstrative in his rejection of the leadership, principles and ideals of the Kadiye:

> IGWEZU: Now it is the turn of the Kadiye.
> KADIYE: I am prepared.
> IGWEZU: With you, holy one, my questions must be roundabout. But you will unravel them, because you speak with the voice of gods ...?
> KADIYE: As I said before, I am ready.
> IGWEZU: Who must appease the Serpent of the Swamps?
> KADIYE: The Kadiye.

IGWEZU: Who takes the gifts of the people, in order that the beast may be gorged and made sleepy-eye with the feast of sacrifice.

KADIYE: The Kadiye.

IGWEZU: [His speech is increasing in speed and intensity.]: On whom does the land depend for the benevolence of the reptile? Tell me that, priest. Answer in one word.

KADIYE: Kadiye.

IGWEZU: Can you see my mask, priest? Is it of this village?

KADIYE: Yes.

IGWEZU: Was the wood grown in this village?

KADIYE: Yes.

IGWEZU: Does it sing with the rest? Cry with the rest? Does it till the swamps with the rest of the tribe?

KADIYE: Yes.

IGWEZU: And so that the Serpent might not vomit at the wrong reason and drown the land, so that He might not swallow at the wrong moment and gulp down unwary traveller, do I offer my goats to the priest?

KADIYE: Yes.

MAKURI: Igwezu, sometimes the guardians of the air are hard to please ...

IGWEZU: Be quite, father! and did he offer them in turn to the Serpent?

KADIYE: He did.

IGWEZU: Everything which he received, from the grain to the bull?

KADIYE: Everything.

IGWEZU: The goat and the white cockerel which I gave before I left?

IGWEZU: And he made it clear-that the offering was from me? That I demanded the protection of the heavens on me and my house, on my mother, on my wife, land and cattels?

KADIYE: All prayers were repeated.

IGWEZU: And ever since I began to till, did I not give the soil his due? Did I not bring the first of the lentils to the shrine, and pour the first oil upon the later?

KADIYE: Regularly.

IGWEZU: And when the Kadiye blessed my marriage, and tied the heaven-made knot,

did he not promise a long life? Did he not promise children? Did he not promise happiness?

[Igwezu has shaved of all except a last smear of lather. He remains standing with one hand around the Kadiye's jowl, the other retaining an indifferent hold of the razor, on the other side of his face.]

KADIYE [Does not reply this time.]

IGWEZU [slowly and disgustedly.]: Why are you so fat, Kadiye?

[The drummer stares, hesitates, and runs out. The servant moves nearer the door.]

The immediate effect of Igwezu's revelations is seen when the Kadiye's attendant the servant and the drummer- leave the house. (p. 109) Like their leader, the Kadiye's supporters are cowards and scoundrels. They run away at the first confrontation with Igwezu. Igwezu's litany of questions addressed to the Kadiye reflect Igwezu's distrust of the ideal of the Kadiye and destructive traditional role they represent. These questions also reveal the dramatist's concern with finding a new direction, through tradition itself for the individual is left here a prey to various fixed principles which lead nowhere but to loss and indecision. Later in the scene, as Igwezu goes on shaving the Kadiye's beard, a striking image is used to sum up the mood of the play and bring forth Igwezu's awareness at the same time. In his stage direction Soyinka is specific:

(Igwezu suddenly shaves the final smear of lather with a rapid stroke which makes the Kadiye flinch. Releases him and throws the razor on the table. Kadiye scrambles up at once, tearing the cloth from his neck. Makes for the door.)(p. 110)

It is at this moment that the Kadiye pronounces his threat quoted earlier in this study: "You shall pay for this ...". The Kadiye withdraws in a shameful defeat: he is no longer the 'fat' tyrant who threatens the villagers. On the contrary, at the first confrontation he looks a defeated featherless peacock. And with his defeat we come to understand that the tyrant knit the webs of his tyrannical empire from superstitions, exploiting the naive and ignorant villagers who have

been deprived of their individual freedom. This baseless tyrannical empire crumbles down when Igwezu, the young, determined and free African who has gained experience from his trip to the city, has torn apart this spider-net.

The Kadiye's defeat, however, does not represent a total victory of the moral trend which Igwezu and the blind beggar advocate; his defeat is only a brief moment which does not count much in the context. The Kadiye is still the leader of the swamps whose natives are almost brain-washed. Igwezu and the blind man are still newcomers to this already established community governed by the Kadiye and his system. Igwezu himself is not yet convinced that he can lead the forces, of morality and true religion represented by the blind beggar "your friend is gone. But will he stay away", (p. 111) he tells the beggar. He will leave the village once more for the city. What does the city represent?

The city is referred to several times in the play, yet we are not taken there, perhaps because it is not the major location of the play, while the village is. Nevertheless, a comparison, and a very sharp one, is laid between the two places, thus suggesting at once that the vices of the African village are as audible as those of the African city, if not more. The city is a place where one learns to earn money and become wealthy, thus forgetting about the right and wrong in one's life: the brother marries his brother's wife. We know very little about Awchike, the second brother; but what we know is perhaps enough to provide us with all that we need to know about what the city do:

> IGWEZU: Awchike is dead to you and this house. Let us not raise his goat. (p. 104)

The village is unliveable because of the prevailing tyranny; but the city is haunted by spiritual death. The village is sick; but the city is pregnant with sickness. What the dramatist attacks in the village is doubly attacked in the city, but by different means and in different ways. The village and the city represent the African society: tradition and materialism. The village is death to the body; the city, to the spirit.

The blind beggar offers to work as a "bondsman" to Igwezu and Igwezu immediately accepts, despite the blindness of the beggar. The beggar's tone and approach convince Igwezu that blindness is compensated for by a deep insight:

> IGWEZU: ... Now where is the stranger who would be my bondsman?
> BEGGAR: Here, master.
> IGWEZU: You sightless ones are known to be gifted with more than human wisdom. You detected from the Kadiye's voice that he was fat ... keep still, priest of the swamps; this razor is keen and my hand is unsettled ... Have I still your attention, bondsman? You have listened to me. Is there anything in my voice which tells you what is lacking? Does something in my voice tell you why the bride of less than a season deserts her husband's side?
> BEGGAR: I must seek that answer in the voice of the bride.
> IGWEZU: That was wisely spoken. You have all the makings of a bondsman. (p. 108)

Throughout *The Swamp Dwellers* Igwezu has amplified his experience twice: first through his experience in the city and the second time through his contact and various conversations with the blind man. Igwezu is now ready for a decision making. Almost at the end of the play, we see him faced with more than one choice. He has already concluded that it "is not necessarily true that fate is determined by the caprice of the gods", (5) as Schipper observes. (p. 146) This judgment, however, is not satisfactory; it requires action. Yet it is the first step towards change, and the blind beggar is not unaware of this conclusion:

> IGWEZU: (Still looking out of the window. Pauses. He walks away, picks up the old man's work in absent movements. He drops it and looks up.): Only the children and the old stay here, bondsman. Only the innocent andthe dotards. (Walks slowly off.)

BEGGAR: But you will return, master? (Igwezu checks briefly, but does not stop.)

BEGGAR: The swallows find their nests again when the cold is over. Even the bats desert dark holes the trees and flap wet leaves eight wings of leather. There were wings everywhere as I wiped my feet against your threshold. I heard the cricket scratch hiself beneath the armpit as the old man said to me...

(The door swings to. The Beggar sighs, gestures a blessing and says.) I shall be here to give accounts (The oil lamps go out slowly and completely. The Beggar remains on the same spot, the moonlight falling on him through the window.) (p. 112)

The questions are left without answers: Igwezu's experience is not yet complete. He leaves the village once more and returns to the city. From the beginning of the play to the last scene, Igwezu has been searching for "personal responsibility" and individual will, he has been searching for meaning One day, I believe, Igwezu, Africa's culture hero, will return to make a significant contribution to the people of his village. Any hope for a better future, Soyinka believes, cannot be easily realized. Hope resides in a generation capable of embracing the ideals and vitality of the modern world supported by the positive values and ideals of the African past, thus forming a harmonious combination of past and present.

## NOTES


1. Wole Soyinka, collected plays *The Swamp Dwellers* (Vol. I) OxfordU. P. 1973. (all other references to the *S. D.* is to this edition).
2. Eldred Jones, *The Writing of Wole Soyinka Heinemann*, London, 1988, (pp. 25-66).
3. Martin Banham, C. Wake, *African Theatre Today*, Pilman Publishing, London, 1976.
4. 4.Anthony Graham - White, *The Drama of Black Africa*, Samuel French, Inc. 1974.
5. Mineke Schipper, *Theatre and Society in Africa*, Raven Press, 1982.

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