


The Swamp Dwellers Summary

Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986, distinguishing him as the first African to receive that honor. His political activism during and after the Nigerian independence struggles informs much of his writing, including his first major drama, *The Swamp Dwellers*, which debuted in 1958. A short play that stages one day in the life of an impoverished Nigerian family, *The Swamp Dwellers* concerns the fallen fortunes of young Igwezu. Critics have read Igwezu's failure as a cautionary message regarding Nigerians' expectations of prosperity following their impending liberation from British rule.

The one-act play takes place in a humble hut perched on stilts in the swamplands of the Niger Delta. The sparse furnishings include a battered swivel chair set beside a few barber tools. Makuri and his wife Alu, both about sixty years old, are discussing their twin sons, Igwezu and Awuchike. In their Yoruban faith system, twins are respected. It's believed their spiritual connection with one another extends even past death such that, if one twin dies, the other may soon follow.

The couple's son Awuchike left their village ten years ago to live in the city, during which time he has enriched himself, but never communicates with his parents. Alu now remarks that Awuchike is dead, not meaning he's physically dead because she wouldn't jeopardize his twin brother's life using careless words. Rather, she means that Awuchike, by severing himself from his familial and cultural roots, is spiritually dead. Igwezu, Awuchike's twin, departed for the city eight months ago, but he has honored his filial duties, even sending the swivel chair as he had promised.



When the play begins, Igwezu has just returned to live again in the village and has immediately gone out to check his fields. Because of recent severe flooding, the swamps are treacherous. Alu worries about Igwezu's safety, anxious not to lose another son, and resolves to go looking for him. Her husband chides her for needlessly fretting. To distract her, he banters with her about infidelity, although he has no doubts regarding her virtue, and he reminds of her of their passionate wedding night.

There is a knock on the door, and, opening it, they find a tall, white-robed beggar. Makuri invites him in, and Alu washes and anoints his feet. The beggar is a Muslim from the north who is blind, he explains, due to the “fly sickness” he experienced as a child. He speaks about a long drought in the north that devastated the region’s agriculture, followed by rains that produced abundant crops. Locusts promptly ate the yield, however, and his people were left with nothing again. The beggar is seeking an opportunity to farm, and he asks Makuri for a piece of submerged earth to reclaim from the swamp. He has ideas about how to salvage the swampland so it might bring prosperity to all. Unbeknownst to him, the swamp is the abode of the local deity, the swamp serpent, so Makuri denounces the beggar’s request as blasphemy. The beggar, respectful of Makuri’s beliefs, says he will travel

on.

At that moment, drums sound. The drummer enters the hut, bowing obsequiously to the next entrant, a very large, opulently dressed man. He, in turn, is followed by another servant who fans the flies away. This is the Kadiye, or serpent priest. He has heard of Igwezu's return, and, it becomes apparent, is anxious to know how much wealth Igwezu accrued in the city. As the serpent priest, the Kadiye accepts sacrificial offerings from villagers for the serpent to guarantee its protection from misfortunes. The Kadiye departs, saying he will return for a shave when Igwezu is home.

Moments later, Igwezu enters the hut. He is in despair because instead of finding his field flourishing, it is flooded beyond repair. Having had not yet heard Igwezu's account of his experiences in the city, his parents question him. He confesses he met with failure, reluctantly intimating he was wronged by his twin brother, Awuchike, now a wealthy timber merchant. Still present, the blind beggar tries to console Igwezu, pledging to become Igwezu's "bondsman" and help him restore the fertility of his farmlands. Moreover, the beggar indirectly hints that the Kadiye could be a fraud. He asks Igwezu if the Kadiye is "fat," suggesting, though not saying, that such self-indulgence while the villagers starve casts suspicion on the Kadiye's spiritual sincerity. Igwezu confirms that the Kadiye is fat.

More drumbeats announce the return of the Kadiye, who asks about Igwezu's success in the city. In response, Igwezu says, "I lost everything; my savings, even my standing as a man." When the Kadiye expresses incredulity, Igwezu details the insults he endured in the city: he lost all his money; he lost his wife to his rich brother; his brother gave him a loan but demanded Igwezu pledge his harvest as security. Now, Igwezu finds his crops destroyed. Igwezu reminds the Kadiye that he made the proper sacrifices to the swamp serpent to ensure its protection, yet he has been forsaken.

The Kadiye sits in the barber chair, and as Igwezu's anger rises, he holds the shaving blade to the Kadiye's jowl and asks, "Why are you so fat, Kadiye?" His faith in the serpent's promise of salvation is broken. Igwezu declares, "We can feed the Serpent of the Swamp and kiss the Kadiye's feet," but this will not secure our well-being. This outburst angers the Kadiye, and he threatens retribution. Makuri reluctantly advises his son to leave the village. The play ends as Igwezu exits the hut, his destination unknown.

Postcolonial scholar Arun Mukherjee writes with respect to postcolonial societies that it's common to suggest national ties bind people "in conflictless brotherhood, that inequalities of caste and class do not exist in these societies," and that after liberation from colonial domination, these societies will recover a harmonious national identity. Soyinka's play belies such optimism. By showing that exploitation of the vulnerable occurs in the modern city and the traditional village alike, the play warns against blind subservience to authority, regardless of its source.