

HRS 151
Study Guide for
Suns of Independence

IMPORTANT: This novel is short and the plot fairly linear, but there is a hidden complexity to it. The third person narrator often describes settings, events, and other characters from the point of view of one or more characters—as if the narrator were a close friend or confidant of that character—without necessarily signaling whose point of view is being represented. Sometimes he will launch into a detailed remembrance of the past of such a character with only a brief transition. The heading of each chapter most visibly illustrates the author's style, often featuring some striking phrase that reflects the perspective of a particular character.

Important Characters

Fama: the sole remaining legitimate descendant of the once-powerful Dumbuya tribe (part of a larger cultural group, the Malinke) that ruled over the Horodugu region. In the novel the tribe's territory, along the southern part of Africa's west coast, is divided between two fictional, newly independent African states, the Ebony Coast & the Socialist Republic of Nikinai.

Salimata: Fama's wife, who has remained childless since their marriage. Her past too is tragic, as her ritual initiation into womanhood was botched.

Jamaru: the old praise-singer of Togobala, Fama's native village and center of the Dumbuya lineage. He is a representative of African culture that has assimilated the norms and practices of Islam.

Balla: the old fetish priest of Togobala village, a representative of pre-Islamic African traditions.

Mariam: the young wife of Fama's deceased cousin Lasina, whom Fama can now claim as his.

two characters named "Bakary:"

1. a distant Dumbuya ancestor of Fama's (p.67-68)

2. a friend Fama's in the capital city, who is tried with him later in the book and who greets Fama upon his release from prison. (p.110-15, 122-24)

politicians, administrators, policemen & citizens (mostly nameless) of the Ebony Coast (a fictive state)

The Plot

PART ONE

Chapters 1 & 2: the opening pages describe the death and funeral of the Malinke Ibrahim Kone. This character's post-mortem journey from the (unnamed) capital city back to his native village sets the tone for the author's contrast of modern city life with traditional village culture. Fama attends Kone's funeral; he is hounded for being late and eventually storms out. Fama then wanders about the city, prays at the mosque, and thinks of Salimata and her inability to conceive a child.

Chapters 3 & 4: Shifting to consider Salimata's perspective, the narrative describes her daily bickering with Fama and trips out of the home to sell rice porridge, as she remembers her thwarted

initiation rite and subsequent rape as a young girl. After her next trip to the market she is robbed by beggars after selling all her porridge. She then consults a local holy man Abullahi, who sacrifices a cock in response to a dream of his and a vision of hers; he also attempts to convince her only he can impregnate her, but she spurns his advance and flees (chapter 4).

PART TWO

Chapter 5 & 6: Fama hears of the death of his cousin Lasina, who had usurped Fama's place as chief in his native village of Togobala. Fama journeys back to Togobala for the funeral, listening to the stories of injustices suffered by those with whom he shares a lorry; he wonders if he should reclaim his ancestral position. The journey through the countryside continues, with Fama staying overnight in the town of Binja, where he remembers the story of the founding ancestors of his lineage. The next day he continues past a customs post, signaling the passage between the two post-independence nations that divide Fama's ancestral territory. He arrives home and is widely greeted in Togobala.

Chapters 7 & 8: Fama greets the groups of people who come to pay their respects to him, receiving advice from the two village elders Jamaru and Balla, whose stories are also told. He then awaits the end of the traditional forty-day period that culminates with Lasina's final funeral rites, pondering the future of his lineage. Near the end of this time there is a potential conflict between his resuming his position as chief and the village representatives of the state party; but this is resolved when both sides agree to keep to their own spheres of influence.

Chapter 9: All attend and successfully complete the final funeral ceremony. Despite Balla's advice, Fama leaves with Mariam for the capital city, to put his affairs in order before settling in Togobala.

PART THREE

Chapter 10: Back in the capital city, Mariam and Salimata drive each other crazy. In the meantime, Fama is swept up in the growing insurrection against the government party; he is eventually detained, tried, and sentenced to prison.

Chapter 11: Remaining faithful to his prayers in prison, Fama dreams of galloping astride a white charger, chasing something that is escaping his grasp. He awakes to find that the (unnamed) President has decided to release all prisoners in the name of reconciliation. Fama's friend Bakary greets him and explains that both Mariam and Salimata have since taken other men. Fama rejects Bakary and mounts a lorry to return to Togobala; but he finds the customs post closed to all travel, and in an attempt to cross it he is shot. In the ambulance that comes to fetch him, Fama once again sees the white charger, and dies as his convoy reaches the village of Togobala.

Vocabulary (as per the Oxford American Dictionary)

"fetish" — an inanimate object worshipped because it is considered to be inhabited by a spirit.

"harmattan" — a dry, dusty wind of the West African coast, occurring December to February.

"lorry" — a large, heavy motor vehicle for transporting goods or troops

"marabout" — a North African Muslim hermit or monk.

"palaver" — prolonged and idle discussion