

Gideon's Freedom

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Instructor: Ms. Andree Cosby

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When Europeans moved into the bush of Southern Africa and realized that they were hopelessly outnumbered, they had to develop ways to create and maintain their authority over the native population. They had tremendous advantages in the obvious areas, as author Jared Diamond writes in his Pulitzer Prize winning book:

The proximate reasons behind the outcome of Africa's collision with Europe are clear. Just as in their encounter with Native Americans, Europeans entering Africa enjoyed the triple advantage of guns and other technology, widespread literacy, and the political organization necessary to sustain expensive programs of exploration and conquest. (398)

The African natives, in this crippled state, had little choice but to submit to European authority. Many Africans lived a life of indentured servitude. Parts of their culture were mixed with that of their oppressors, and over time, so were their bloodlines. Some of their indigenous culture did survive, however. Shamanism, the practice of physical and spiritual healing by a medicine man that occurs in practically every hunting and gathering society, continued to thrive in Africa despite the oppression by European settlers. The concoctions and methods of this practice were well-guarded secrets, known only to certain African natives. The European medicine of the day was basically a version of our contemporary Western medicine in its infancy, and its doctors' methods shared little, if anything, in common with the methods of the African medicine man, or witchdoctor.

Gideon, the central character in Doris Lessing's short story "No Witchcraft For Sale," is an African native and a keeper of the secrets of this mysterious practice. In the story, Gideon administers a medicinal root to the son of his European employers. When word gets around, a white doctor asks Gideon to show him the root so that it can be made available on a commercial basis. He chooses to defy the authority of his superiors to protect the secrets of his trade and his culture.

Gideon's life as a humble servant leaves him with little power over anything. His role as a witchdoctor is where his only true power lies. It is a kind of power that would be extremely important to one who lives to serve. As "the son of a famous medicine man," he was born into a very special tradition (Lessing 73). "Witchdoctors.... are well trained in traditional medical practice, psychology and psychiatry and symbolize the hopes of their society; hopes of good health, protection and security from evil forces, prosperity and good fortune, and ritual cleansing when harm or impurities have been contracted" (Anti 4). Gideon's defiance may be explained by the fact that the secret root is part of a tradition that a European doctor is not included in; a lesson passed from father to son. Furthermore, it could be concluded that, to a witchdoctor, there is more to medicine than simply taking a pill to cure an ailment, whereas in Western medicine, that's usually just what the doctor ordered. This is a fundamental difference in perspective that could be another reason for Gideon's defiance.

Perhaps one could dig a little deeper, though, and find a less speculative, more concrete reason. Amare Getahun, a science professor at Addis Adebba University in Ethiopia, writes:

...witchdoctors have been able to implant into the minds of many that the healing power of the plant loses its curative and healing virtues should the secret (that is, the name) of the plant and its reputed use, be disclosed....This has meant that a

witchdoctor will be hesitant to pass on his knowledge of medicine to anyone except his offspring, and even then only as he nears death. . . . whoever merits the honor, is sworn to keep the secret with due care throughout his life. (1)

This is conclusive evidence that when Gideon was asked to show the doctor the root, he was asked to betray centuries of tradition, and as a consequence, surrender the minuscule amount of power that he held over his European superiors.

Besides his obligations as a medicine man, it could be that a certain degree of arrogance is to blame for Gideon's disobedience. From a sociological perspective, all cultures are equally valid, but as a member of a particular culture, it is oftentimes difficult to understand the ways of another. Everyone wants to believe that his or her culture is superior. Gideon, notwithstanding his humility and loyalty to his employers, must wonder about the apparent senselessness of Europe's "Divide and Conquer" mentality. The difference between Gideon and his European employers is the equivalent of the difference between a tribal, hunting and gathering society and a city/state political organization. One exists as a part of nature while the other manipulates and therefore alienates itself from the very nature that gives birth to it. Doris Lessing writes from firsthand experience in the story:

No one can live in Africa, or at least on the veld, without learning very soon that there is an almost ancient wisdom of leaf and soil and season-and, too, perhaps most important of all, of the darker tracts of the human mind-which is the black man's heritage. (70)

This ancient wisdom is the birthright of Gideon and his people, the ability to live and thrive in the world they were born into without attempting to control it.

Sometimes the right thing to do is to disobey. One has to weigh the implications of disobedience on one's own scale. Right and wrong are relative to circumstance. The circumstances surrounding Gideon's situation dictates his course of action and his decision reflects his strength of character. A man who lives with daily oppression, he chooses not to sell his dignity. Noted philosopher Erich Fromm comments, "A person can become free through acts of disobedience by learning to say no to power"(380). Gideon's disobedience is his freedom.

Works Cited

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Scott Caro is studying basic curriculum. Ms. Andree Cosby was his English instructor.

Ms. Cosby's Comments: *Scott did an excellent job of applying the ideas we discussed in class relating to the "Obedience to Authority" unit (WRAC) to the analysis of Doris Lessing's "No Witchcraft for Sale." He was also very creative with his use of research sources.*