

Reading Group Guide

The Hands of Time

In the Hands of the Enemy

1. Both Kokumbo's and Rivotra's stories begin with a traumatic injury. In each case, would you say this injury is the defining moment of their later trajectory (and later treachery?) or could it be traced back to an earlier event?
2. Both Kokumbo and Rivotra come from worlds where they are considered subhuman because of their skin color and/or origin. Kokumbo was removed from his original home whereas Rivotra's home was occupied. How does this change the dynamic of being considered subhuman? How do the attitudes of the two "superior" groups differ because of this?
3. In Malagasy, "mahitsy" literally means "innocence" or "to be innocent." What is the significance, then, of Rivotra being cast out of his village, Mahitsy? Is there any additional significance to him being taken in by a Catholic family?
4. Neither Kokumbo nor Rivotra find the revenge they seek (the master/master's son for Kokumbo; Vala for Rivotra). How does this fuel their anger or victim mentality? Do you believe things would have been different if they had fulfilled that need for revenge?
5. Kokumbo initially finds acceptance among his people because he leads a successful revolt, but he is later abandoned when they fear he has gone insane with bloodlust. Do you agree? Where do you believe he may have crossed a line? Do you think he could have stopped or gone back and tried to make amends? Meanwhile, Rivotra cannot find acceptance among either the Malagasy or the French, despite his closer French appearance or his work for a Malagasy nationalist group. Do you believe this stems from either his actions or inactions, or the attitudes of the people around him? Was there anything he could have done differently to earn the trust and respect of his peers on one side of his heritage or another?
6. What does LaPour's demonstration of Time spark in Rivotra's imagination? Is his comparison to primitive divining a good one? Do you believe it to be helpful or hurtful? Can you think of a better way to describe Time?
7. On the whole, the Malagasy believe that fate is fixed, and everything that happens cannot be changed or avoided. How does this attitude drive Rivotra, if at all? What is the significance of his apparent dual-nature and his ability to choose? How does this affect his decision to leave the possibility of an otherwise safe, secure home with a loving family?
8. Do you believe Kokumbo's insistence at freeing the port slaves absolves him of some of his questionable behavior thus far and paints him as a liberator, or is it only to satisfy his own ego? How would things have looked if having the extra mouths to feed caused some to starve?
9. How does Rifun adjust to French life? Is there a way he could have handled it better than he did with the Macrons? What do you make of his conversation with Louise the housekeeper? Do you think it would have been different if he hadn't been blind?

10. After the storm and Ezra's death, reality sets in for the former slaves that they are all alone. Do you believe they set off with too high hopes and not enough plans, or do you believe that death in freedom is better than life in slavery? Is it situational?
11. How does Rifun regaining his sight change his purpose and perspective? What is the link, in his mind, between Time, the shaman's divination, his Apprentice review, and the vision of his mother? Do you believe this is helpful or harmful? (Bonus: Close your eyes and visualize your surroundings. Attempt to navigate them.)
12. Rifun goes to see a play, *Othello*. Is there any irony in this, and who would you say corresponds to each of the major roles in *Othello*? Does it change as the story goes on?
13. What do you make of Kokumbo's "vision" of the spirit? Do you think it could be a real apparition or simply a trick of the mind as he is dying? How would you explain the sudden healing of his injuries?
14. What is the significance of the lines Rivotra recites while auditioning for the part of Rosencrantz? Is there any additional significance to the roles he is later cast in? Given the nature of the roles, do you believe there is any foreshadowing to Rivotra's story? If so, what?
15. How does Rivotra react to his script being rejected? Is there any merit to his argument that France is ruling a people they know nothing about and should grant Madagascar its independence? Do you think the two nations could become allies in such a situation? Are there other alternative views or possible solutions?
16. Kokumbo reaches a point where he has outlived his natural lifespan, and all the slaves he helped free are probably dead. How does this change his perspective on life? How does it change his need for revenge and desire to kill? How does it influence his decision to either help the Underground Railroad or abandon it?
17. How does the Akari change Kokumbo, given that he dictates to Richard things he does not normally know? Does this have any effect on his job at the gaol? How does he react to Julianna's proposal to recruit new members to the organization?
18. What effect does Rivotra's past work for the VVS have on his military career? How does he feel about bringing theater to the base? What are his motivations for advancing in both the military as well as Timekeeping? What does he think about it all when he is sent into combat?
19. What effect does torture have on Rivotra's psyche? Why do you think he does not escape the prison when he obviously has the power to do so? How does the failure of the Uprising and his time in prison affect his decisions going forward? What do you make of his conversation with Ivolu about his scars? Do you believe Rivotra capable of making good decisions so soon after his release?
20. What is the significance of Kokumbo cutting up Julianna's face? Why do you think she does not heal herself, and does it have any bearing on bringing Rivotra to meet Kokumbo?
21. What do you make of the Cult sticking together for over a century being ruled by a Borelian?

What does it say about the collective beliefs and/or state of mind? What does it say about Isthim? What influence has exile and her time among humans had on her?

22. Like Julianna, why does Rivotra decide to not heal himself? Do you believe it is acceptance, or is there some other possible underlying motive? Do you think Ivolo had any influence on this decision?
23. What factors contributed to Rivotra agreeing to join the Cult and attempt to kill Kokumbo? Do you believe he weighed his options objectively when he considered the Akarin? Were there other factors that could have contributed to his decision? How do his inherent religious and philosophical beliefs influence his decision?
24. How would you explain or justify Kokumbo' actions in the election? Do you believe he was behind all of it, or only parts? Which ones? What would be his motivation? How would you characterize his state of mind? What do you make of his decisions afterwards, to take advantage of the chaos and become a mercenary?
25. How does Rivotra convince Kokumbo to return to the Cult? Could there have been another method? Should he have done so? What does it say about Rivotra's ability to negotiate and persuade? What does it say about Kokumbo' focus and ability to commit to anything? What tensions or problems does it bring up with Julianna and Isthim?
26. How does Kokumbo feel about being constantly reminded that he brought Isthim into the Cult? Is it helpful or harmful to their cause? Their cohesiveness as leaders? Have you ever been constantly reminded of some shortfall despite not being able to do anything to remedy it?
27. How does the power dynamic change, if at all, when Rivotra sleeps with Isthim? What do they think about it? What do Julianna and Kokumbo think about it? Do you believe it will remain as “casual” as Isthim thinks it is?
28. How do Rivotra and Kokumbo handle the meeting with the Borelians? Is either one more correct in his part? Is anything they do or say more productive or destructive? What does each think is the fatal flaw in the other that could get them all killed or enslaved? How does Isthim handle things? What could be her blind spot?
29. How does the massacre in the auctionhouse reflect the slave revolt in the beginning of the story? How is it different? What is Kokumbo's state of mind, and how do you think it will change going forward?