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### **Ancestral Belief in Adebowale's *The Virgin* and Ngugi's *The River Between* Ojedoja, Sanjo & Abubakar, A.S.**

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#### **Abstract**

The focus in this work is the re-examination of the place of the ancestors in contemporary world. This paper critically evaluates the pre-colonial status of the ancestors and clearly explains the pride of place they once enjoyed. The invasions of religions, especially Christianity and Islam maliciously challenge the place of the ancestors today. It is the thrust of this paper that since the missionary religions have made a lot of converts among the traditional people, as a consequence, little or no regard is paid to them. The converts prefer to go their new worship centres instead of venerating their departed. The civilization the West brought to Africa had helped in no small way to pave way for the high disregards for them. This paper concludes that since the living ones do not even show moral sanctity Africa was once known for, propelled by greed and materialism, moral sanctity should be allowed to rest in peace.

#### **Introduction**

It cannot be denied that oral tradition is fundamental in any endeavour to determine the nature of African literature. Dseagu (1987) argued, "the African novel has an identity of its own derivable from the oral narratives" (p. 20). Johnson is another example of a literary critic who stresses the importance of orality in African literary discourse, as is evident when he remarks that "contemporary written literature in Africa continues to derive a great deal of its vitality from older traditions of verbal art". (Johnson, s.a:1). Such critics remind non-African critics in particular that they should bear this in mind when studying

African literature, because modern Western written literature is not so obviously steeped in oral tradition (although it may be argued that Homer was an oral poet).

This work thus sets out that the lack of real acknowledgement of and appreciation for oral tradition as the cornerstone of literature, especially of African literature, is the result of two major factors: its minor role in the Western critical tradition as well as the negative influence of colonialism in Africa. Western scholarship has more or less exclusively focused on the narrow interpretation of the world literature which the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines as the acquaintance with letters or books or literary culture. This approach thus effectively denies the existence of oral tradition as part of literature. Colonialism on the other hand, determines the nature of the educational systems in Africa. Literary curricula are thus premised on Western educational practices. As a result, adherence to the westernized educational system negates the existence of oral tradition, which in turn leads to a situation that contributes to reinforcing a feeling of cultural inferiority and alienation in colonial and post-colonial youth.

Vansina (1961) defined oral tradition as “historical sources of special nature derived from the fact that they are unwritten sources couched in a form suitable for oral transmission and their preservation depends on the power of memory of successive generations of human beings” (p. 7). This definition of oral literature is not an exception because even relatively current studies on oral literature still merely confine it to the verbal art as Agatucci (1998) opines that “in contrast to written literature, African orature is orally composed and transmitted, and often created to be verbally and communally performed as an integral part of dance or music” (p. 1).

Lusweti (1984) provided a fairly simple but workable definition of oral literature that reflects the more contemporary view of regarding as oral literature even works in written form:

Strictly speaking, ‘oral’ means ‘expressed in spoken words’, but oral literature now includes material in written form (as long as it was originally expressed orally). The immediacy of the spoken word contributes to the richness and beauty of the written language (p. 1).

Finnegan (1978) also favoured “a fairly wide approach to what can be counted as oral”. She, therefore does not feel that “a poem (and by extension, any literary work) must have been in every respect, composed, transmitted, and performed orally to be regarded as belonging to oral tradition” (p. 2). As a result, she even includes as part of oral tradition literary works where the original composition has not been oral, but where “the primary means of delivery and circulation are” (p. 3). According to this demarcation, even literary broadcast on the radio may be regarded as belonging to oral tradition. Both Lusweti and Finnegan’s definitions of oral literature find resonance in thesis of Groden and Kreiswirth (1997) when they assert that “the privileging of (written) literature over creature is increasingly discredited in view of the continual flux between orality and literacy” (p. 3).

It is thus evident that the modern definition of oral tradition veers in the direction of regarding as oral literature all forms of literary composition in which any of the three elements characteristic of orality is dominant, namely: oral composition, oral performance and oral transmission.

### **Ancestral Belief in Adebowale’s *The Virgin***

Ancestors are the progenitors of those who are still living. Before, they too were human beings, but they now exchange their world for that of the cosmic. Africans believe strongly in life after death. It is also strongly held that reincarnation is followed by deification at least for heroic characters. The dead is transformed into a new life in another realm, from where they cater for those who are still living. Ancestral belief and worship has become a kind of religious activity in Africa masquerades (Egungun) are the ancestors that come back to life.

Their voices are guttural, different from that of the living. Almost every family in Africa worships ancestors in one form or the other, children are given names of their ancestors. The respect accorded the dead illustrates this. Some of the activities during burial ceremonies develop into elaborate dramatic songs. Songs are composed to express the sense of loss, and achievement of the dead (See Ogunjimi & Na'Allah, 1991, p. 9).

Ancestral belief is used in Adebowale's work on page one. He described the environment thus:

The cool night breeze had a soothing effect on everything in the village of Orita in Elerin District. For a brief period of time, there was quite. There was tranquility. It was dead in the night, the time when the ancestral spirits usually hovered around in the groves; the time when witches often danced their grotesque dance, and sang in muffled tones, sending a message of bereavement to the world, in the clumps of the banana trees. One could, in fact hear now the imaginary song of the supernaturals – those who held so much dominion and power over silent night! We are visitors from the remote world seeking a taste of your warm blood at this tender age of yours when your deeds of life are yet undone (p. 1).

“It was the belief of the people that business transactions were done at Sagbe, not only by ordinary human beings, but also by the supernatural beings from the spirit world. The supernatural beings would come in hundreds-male and female and mingle with the villagers on the market day, to provide the usual Sagbe colour and radiance” (p. 81).

When Awero is to get married, her father asks her to kneel down so as to pray for her. By so doing, he invokes the spirit of their ancestors to bless his daughter (Awero): “the spirit of our fore-fathers be with you... guide you and make you tread a straight path...” (p. 90).

#### **Ancestral Belief in Ngugi's *The River Between***

The narrative thrust of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's anxiety surrounding circumcision-an indigene Kenyan rite practiced upon both boys and girls that ensures their successful passage into adulthood. Coupled with the novel's setting between two mountain ridges, Ngugi's portrayal of circumcision (particularly female's circumcision) enacts a sustained sexual metaphor that crudely genders these mountain ridges as a female-coded liminal zone and, in addition, portrays the contending Kameno and Makuyu claims for these ridges as figurative “circumcision” narratives themselves. As perhaps Ann McClintock might argue, Ngugi genders the novel's Kenyan landscape as female in an attempt to portray Kameno and Makuyu antagonism as a fundamentally masculinity competition for patriarchal dominance.

Waiyaki, towards the novel's opening, looks forward to his circumcision as a thing of excitement and trepidation: “This would mark his final initiation into manhood. Then he would prove his courage, his mainly spirit” (p. 14). Ngugi connects circumcision to the notions of “place” and religion in order to locate Waiyaki's circumcision ritual in the precarious landscape of Kenyan mountain ridges that are soon to meet colonial exploitation.

“The knife produces a thin sharp pain as it cut through the flesh. The surgeon had done his work. Blood tricked freely onto the ground, sinking into the soil. Henceforth a religious bond linked Waiyaki to the earth, as if his blood was an offering” (p. 52). But whereas Waiyaki's circumcision proceeds without incident, the debacle surrounding Muthoni's circumcision and subsequent death emphasizes above all the metaphorical relevance of female circumcision and its ramifications upon the gender dynamics of both Kameno and Makuyu social formations and families.

In *The River Between*, circumcision assumes a paradoxical double-function. On one hand, circumcision is an indigenous, traditional, and therefore perhaps anti-colonial rite that operates as a form of resistance

against impeding British imperialism. In the following passage, for example, Ngugi juxtaposes circumcision and Christian principles:

For Nyambura had learnt and knew that circumcision was sinful. It was a pagan rite from which she and her sister had been saved. A daughter of God should never let even a thought of circumcision come to her mind (p. 27).

Nyambura's reticence towards circumcision results from her internalization of Christian beliefs and subsequent disavowal of indigenous cultural practices. And yet female circumcision is also fundamentally masculinity system of oppression that maintains and legitimates the subjugation of women. Clearly, the voice of circumcision forecasts somewhat the violence of decolonization; walker and others have elsewhere deftly portrayed the violence and humiliation of female circumcision. Is circumcision an anticolonial exercise or an oppressive patriarchal measure done upon women to ensure their willing submission to masculine dominance?

Nyambura herself questions the legitimacy of the Christian censure of circumcision – suggesting not only that her Christian parents had themselves been circumcised but that the Old Testament itself betrays some ambivalence over the value of circumcision:

Father and mother are circumcised. Are they not Christians? Circumcision did not prevent them from being Christians. I too have embraced the white man's faith. However, I know it is beautiful, oh so beautiful to be initiated into womanhood. Surely there is no tribe that does not circumcise. Or how does a girl grow into a woman? (p. 30).

Clearly, circumcision carries multiple, shifting meanings that are continually brought into crisis against each other. Arguably, anti-colonial, masculinity, secular, spiritual, circumcision in one sense assumes a foremost position in the conflicts symbolized by the novel's setting. How, for instance, might we conceptualize such conflicts, tensions, and frictions (including the sexual friction of Nyambura and Waiyaki) as demonstration of Barthes model of "jouissance", in which the unresolvable friction of multiple meaning ridges) create a certain reading pleasure?

#### **Ancestral Belief of Gikuyu People with their Land in Ngugi's *The River Between***

Abram (1998) opines that as you walk through the land, then, the places you see and the sites you encounter are continually sparking the memory of the particular stories associated with those places and sites. The land is the primary mnemonic for remembering the oral stories. So, while ancestral knowledge is held, as it were, in the stories, the stories are held in the land. The land is alive with stories!

From the foregoing, "land is of fundamental importance for the Gikuyu people in particular and to the Africans in general. Of course, the soil is fertile and life giving, so that the people depend on it for their social and economic survival. But the significance of the land was given to them by God, as the legend re-told. The land plays a vital role in tribal religion for the people as they make reverence to their ancestors, whose bodies are buried in the soil, while their spirits guard over the earth (Pollitzer, 1999, p. 116).

This historical bond is reinforced by traditional rituals such as circumcision, thus during Waiyaki's initiation, as his blood trickles into the ground. Ngugi comments: "Henceforth a religious bond linked Waiyaki to the earth, as if his blood was an offering "(Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1965, p 45). The ridges of Kameno and Makuyu are eventually affected by the white man's conquest of the nearby hills. The Christians accept with reasonable agreement with the new government post, but Waiyaki and the traditionalist feel "the shame of a people's land taken away, the humiliation of paying taxes for a government that you know nothing about" (p. 164).

However, there is disagreement about the best means of resisting the physical encroachment of the settlers on their territory. Kabonyi advocates violent opposition to the new comers, while Waiyaki offers the subtler retaliation of equipping the people with the white man's education through building more schools:

With the little knowledge that he had he would uplift the tribe, yes; give it the white man's learning and his tools so that in the end the tribe would be strong enough, wise enough, to chase away the settler's and the missionaries. And Waiyaki saw a tribe great with many educated sons and daughters, all living together, tilling the land of their ancestors in perpetual serenity, pursuing their rituals and beautiful customs, and all of them acknowledging their debt to him (p. 87).

Ngugi has been described as a religious novelist, and certainly pervades this book, both traditional beliefs and the new faith. Even the language is with religious overtones and allusions. As with most Africans south of the Sahara, so among the Gikuyu, there is no division between the secular and the sacred: religion is bound up with the whole culture. The Gikuyu people believe themselves to be surrounded by God-in the hills, rivers, trees. All the rituals and the relationship in the tribe, has a religious meaning. The church is portrayed as a destructive force, denying much that is life-giving and life-enhancing in the tribe: its rituals, music, dance and traditional education.

From the above, it is clear that Ngugi does not make a condemnation of Christianity per se, but tries as much as possible to bring out the tradition of the Gikuyu people. Nyambura, for instance, although she rebels against the strict, puritanical brand of Christianity preached by her father, has no wish to reject the aspects of the new religion which appeal to her spirituality rather she yearns for a practical expression among her family and her people of the comfort and forgiveness, which lies at the heart of Christ's message. Even Waiyaki, cast in the role of traditional leader, responds to certain elements in Christianity. But the problem is that the new religion has been imposed from outside, as a rigid dogmatic set of laws, which instead of integrating with the old beliefs conflict with them. As Waiyaki himself muses:

A religion that took no count of people's way of life, a religion that did not recognize spots of beauty and truths in their way of life, was useless. It would not satisfy. It would not be a living experience, a source of life and vitality. It would only maim a man's soul, making him fanatically cling to whatever promised security, otherwise he would be lost (p. 141).

To sum it up, one can see that "to force a traditionally oral people off of their ancestral lands – perhaps because you want to flood those lands with a new hydroelectric dam project, or clear cut their pristine forests, as in Indonesia and Malaysia, or to eradicate their traditional beliefs, or for whatever purpose to shove an oral people out of their ancestral homeland is, effectively, to shove them out of their mind. Because the land is what they think with?" (see Abram in Gary Snyder's "Mountains and Rivers Without End").

### **Conclusion**

Since moral theory evaluates literature in terms of its contribution to society and to the development of humanity at large. Adebowale draws our attention to the tenacious belief of the people of Elerin in their ancestors. Example is shown in the novel in page (p. 81) of the book that the business transaction is not carried out by ordinary human beings. Ngugi's attention is on the issue of circumcision, the Gikuyu people belief that one can only attain to adulthood through circumcision. He also shows that land is importance to the Gikuyu people in particular and Africans in general.

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