SAMPLE OF LITERATURE REVIEW IN A TOPIC RELATED TO TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN SOME WEST AFRICAN NOVELISTS WORKS

Author: Dr. Labo Bouché Abdou

ABSTRACT: African traditional religion is one of the starting points of the West African literature, and in most of the first generation of West African writers’ novels, the topic is largely developed. These novelists have observed many of the qualities and roles ascribed to traditional religion in the expression of the African cultural identity. Any West African critic who neglects religion in his writings is also neglecting an important, even indispensable literary movement of the past, which has played a crucial role in the African’s quest to the present, and a direction for the future.

The African past was decapitated by the slave trade and the white domination, and the writers reconstruct the West African pre-colonial era, through its religious and cultural practices. African traditional religion is one of the starting points of the West African literature, and in most of the first generation of West African writers’ novels, the topic is largely developed. These novelists have observed many of the qualities and roles ascribed to traditional religion in the expression of the African cultural identity. Any West African critic who neglects religion in his writings is also neglecting an important, even indispensable literary movement of the past, which has played a crucial role in the African’s quest to the present, and a direction for the future.

Key Words: Sample of literature review, traditional religious beliefs, West African novelists.

Introduction

This work is dedicated to scholars and mainly young researchers who have difficulties with literature review once they want to write a M.A. dissertation on a given topic. Bellow is an attempt on how to deal with a scientific creative writing reassessment.

Concept of the supernatural or mystical world in African traditional religious beliefs.

African past was decapitated by the slave trade and the white domination; writers reconstruct West African pre-colonial era, through its religious and cultural practices. Oladele Taiwo’s (1981) observations underscore the central role that religion plays in the life of West Africans:

“It is the religious and cultural practices which give meaning to human life …” (127-28).

This accords with the view of the sociologists Onigu Otite and William Ogionw (1979), who recognize that ‘the concept of the supernatural is basic and crucial in a definition of religion.’ To their view 'the relationship between man and the supernatural is not haphazard, it is institutionalized’ (153), one can only add that the supernatural is linked with the mystical world in the traditional societies. These two patterns give to the traditional religion its strength. The influence of mysterious things such as the witch- bird in Francis Selormey’s The Narrow Path, or the Sea-King in Elechi Amadi’s The Concubine, conditions the traditional communities. Every aspect of life in these communities has its explanation in the cosmic world, and has a place in the religious life.

African concept of traditional religion may differ from the European one in many ways; but Durkheim’s assertion that ‘religion contributes to order in society by creating conditions for social well-being, self-discipline, social cohesion and the continuity of culture and traditions’ (Otite and Ogionw, 1979: 157) also fits Achebe’s viewpoint on traditional religion; especially in Things Fall Apart, where the author’s portrayal of the Igbo religion helps readers to appreciate its role as bedrock of societal harmony and its centrality to Black Africans’ cultural identity.
In that novel in particular, Achebe “gives an idea of the heavy responsibility which a title imposes on the bolder and how the religious beliefs of the people their actions and attitudes” (Otite and Ogionwo, 1979: 35).

Religion has been defined in different ways. An examination of some sociological and anthropological works by such writers as Emile Durkheim, John S. Mbiti, Melford E. Spiro, Bolaji Idowu, A.R. Radcliffe Brown, Onigu Otite and W. Ogionwo (1979), shows that there is no standard definition of religion because the concept of God varies from one place to another, and from one religion to the other. Emile Durkheim, for example, views religion as ‘a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden - beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them’ (152). The consideration by Durkheim of religion as a cultural organization set up for the satisfaction of some needs is what prompts Lewis Coser's (1979) counter to him by asserting that his solidarity theory of religion ignores ‘the historical evidence that indicates that religion, although it may draw men together, may also separate them and set them against each other1 (157). In his portrayal of the relationship between Ezeulu and Ezidemili in Arrow of God, Achebe has proved clearly the dual function of religion as a divisive as well as uniting force.

By lending support to M.E. Spiro's (1979) definition of religion as 'an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings' (157), Otite and W. Ogionwo (1979) affirm strongly that traditional African religion is ‘conservative (and) non-revolutionary.’ For them:

> “An African religion belongs to the people concerned with its practice and usages; in its processes, it emphasises the community rather than the individual aspects. It has evolved over the centuries as part of Africa's social and cultural life... As Mbiti observes, ...it would be meaningless and useless to try and transplant it to an entirely different society outside of Africa, unless African people themselves go with it there” (159).

The specific case of African religions, namely Black West African religion, pushes many writers to develop the theme of religious conflict in fictions. The traditional societies’ attachment to superstition is wedded to inexplicable things attributed to the invisible world. John Mbiti (1969) says:

> “For most of their life, African peoples place God in the transcendental plane making it seem as if He is remote from their daily affairs. But they know that He is immanent, being manifested in natural objects and phenomena, and they can turn to him in acts of worship, at any place and any time ... (Hence) in theory God is transcendental but in practice, He is immanent” (33).

Mazisi Kunene (1980) on his side extends the idea of the uniqueness of the Ibo religion to the whole of Africa. After defining African literature as a celebration of man's life and all living creations in the cosmos, he affirms that:

> “The gods are not worshipped in Africa but revered. They are participants in man's life as allies. They themselves may sometimes enlist the services of special men and women to convey their will. Man equally has the right to appeal for the destruction of a person enemy unless it can be demonstrated that the opponent has violated a fundamental ethic. The gods are forces that link man with the unknowable supreme creator. This does not mean that man must approach the Creator through them but rather that they are delegated by the Creator with specific creative and divine responsibilities. The gods utilize this potential on behalf of man. Man can appeal to them for their gifts but their power is limited for man already has a direct relationship with the Creator through the agency of his ancestors” (192-93).

Traditional religion is very special because it turns round the ancestors. Nothing can be done without imploring the ancestors. It seems that these ancestors are the representatives of the living in the presence of the creator. Each activity, each movement starts with a praying to the ancestors. Everybody in the clan is obliged to pray to the ancestors when beginning an action - eating, drinking, planting, harvesting or farming. Even Unoka, Okonkwo's 'lazy and improvident' father (in Things Fall Apart) who ‘was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow, prayed to [his] ancestors for life and health, and for protection against [his] enemies’ (Achebe, 1958: 5).
The phenomenon of traditional African religion is huge and very complex. Despite the all-pervasive nature of this aspect of African life in works by African writers, critics have paid scanty attention to it. The concern of this work is to enlighten readers (and young writers of West African literature) through an objective debate on traditional religious beliefs. This portrayal of the image of the African traditional before and after the coming of the Europeans will be limited to a selection of novels by Camara Laye, Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, and Ayi Kwei Armah: *The African Child*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, *The Concubine*, *The Great Ponds* and *Fragments* are all novels that seem to be insightful fusion of formal characteristics of both traditional religion and traditional communities.

**Literature review related to the significance of psychic forces in traditional Africa.**

The significance of this topic lies in the following points. Any study of the early West African Novel is not comprehensive without understanding the supernatural world. Because the ancestral beliefs have lost their originality, knowing their true identity satisfies an intellectual curiosity. In any case, the celebration of the ancestors is still of great importance in several parts of West Africa. As is said by Achebe (1969), ‘... the past needs to be recreated not only for the enlightenment of our detractors but even more for our own education. Because ... the past with all its imperfections, never lacked dignity’ (14). It is the West African writer's duty to fight for the national reconstruction. Since his contribution is mainly cultural, he has to rehabilitate the African culture and to guide his fellow Africans on the safe road of mental and psychological liberation. He shall save them from the western acculturation for the benefit of the African culture and psychology.

Oladele Taiwo (1981) more than anyone else spends much time on the West African religious beliefs. He enumerates the pantheons of Gods and deities the Igbo land owned:

“The seven million people of Igboland hold various religious beliefs. The most important of them is the belief in the ultimate Reality, designated Chi Ukwu (The Great God) and Chukwu Okike (the God that creates); another of his titles is Chineke, again meaning the God that creates. These titles indicate a belief in a supreme source of beneficient creation, who is the creator of Heaven and Earth, sends rain and makes life grow. Next to Chineke is a pantheon of high gods like Anyanwu (the sun God); Igwe (the sky god); Amadi Oha (lightning and thunder), and Âne (the Earth goddess). These gods work independently of each other, but collectively pay allegiance to Chineke . . .  Apart from these important gods there are other minor deities who feature in daily life of the people; hence the innumerable sacrifices offered to them to make them happy enough to look with favour on man's enterprises of agriculture, hunting, marriage and warfare” (136).

Taiwo brings to light the diversity of the Igbo gods on whom the communities depended for their survival. In addition to what he has said, we may observe that the names of the gods vary from one area to another and they are present everywhere in Black West Africa, acting the same role.

Since traditional religion embraces the whole Black West African Societies, it will not be sufficient to focus the work on the traditional religious beliefs through Gods, their intermediaries and the villagers alone. This religion is very communal and highly respected by the whole communities. It conditions them, and it is alternatively tough and flexible. What explains the easiness with which the new religion, Christianity, settles and starts to embarrass it? After discussing the conflict between the traditional religion and the new religion, Abiola Irele (1979) concludes that Christianity has a liberating influence on the believers. Nwoye's example, which Irele notes in *Things Fall Apart* is illustrative:

“It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the morrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in the darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul - the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He” felt relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul” (14).

Emmanul Obiechina (1979) has worked mainly on the African traditions. His book entitled *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel*, is like a guide which develops these three terms, without any emphasis on the traditional religion. He succeeds in enumerating the different kinds of Gods, as has been done by
Taiwo. But at the end of his debate, he joins Irele's idea by affirming that ‘... under the combined pressure of the new colonial administration, the Christian Church and the new economic forces, the Oracles and the priests are beginning to lose their hold on the people’ (175).

This idea is clearly expressed in his essay “The Human Dimension of History in Arrow of God”. Three main points are discussed in that essay: The forces working against tradition, the conflict in Arrow of God, and the collective security. Concerning the first point, Obiechina (1979) asserts that the local school, the irreverent strangers like the catechist Good Country, and the inarticulate though palpable reality of the White man’s administrative presence; have undermined traditional confidence and shaken the sense of common purpose and solidarity which in the past constituted the spirit of traditionalism (170). In the second point, the critic affirms that the conflict in Arrow of God grows around Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of Ulu, and the ritual and religious leader of Umuru. At this level, he has enumerated three different conflicts linked together by the same rope, that of colonialism: a) conflict between the local British administration represented by the old-fashioned administrator, Winterbottom, and the native authority represented by the Chief Priest, b) The internal politics of Umuru and the conflict between the supporters of the Chief Priest and those of his rival, Idemili: Intercommunal rivalry between Nwaka and Ezeulu c) Conflict taking place within the Chief Priest himself, a conflict between personal power, the temptation to constitute himself into an ‘arrow’ of God, and the exigencies of public responsibility.

Lastly, Obiechina (1979) raises the problem of collective security, which, he says, is to be increased by the presence of the colonial administration, since ‘the colonial authority has taken away from the traditional authority and people their right to exercise judicial or even non-legal violence (173)- Before the coming of the white man, Ulu's protection of security is general: religious, political, military, ethical and economic. But now with the strangers interference, Ezeulu the Chief Priest of Ulu, starts to lose his role and power in the traditional community.

In short, Obiechina depicts the changes which traditional religion undergoes through the influence of the new religion and the colonial administration in Arrow of God. He deals with the impact of colonization and its consequences on traditional Africa. We want to complete his work ‘by discussing the uniqueness and communality of ancestral religion in both Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God.

Lloyd Brown's (1979) position is not drastically different from Obiechina's. In his essay, 'Cultural Norms and Modes of Perception in Achebe’s Fiction’, he focuses on Achebe's interest in the relationship between cultural norms and perceptual values. He says 'in transferring the literary norms of the colonialist's language to his own writing, in using this medium to subvert white ethnocentrism in favour of the African's self-perception' (25), the author's characters symbolize Achebe's creative imagination of an ex-colonial writer. For example, he stresses that the white man's failure to understand African customs in Things Fall Apart is 'bound up with his ignorance of the African language' (24). Brown (1979) talks about the anthropological framework of Achebe's narrative, an understanding of which is needed to clarify the moral and cultural significance of Okonkwo's suicide. He affirms that:

“The anthropologic background of Okonkwo's death projects the tragedy as an apocalypse: the old Africa with all its beauty and power is crumbling under the simultaneous pressures of white imperialism from without, and self-destructive forces from within. But when these social data and cultural judgements are presented to the white anthropologist, he distorts them because of his narrow perspectives” (29).

Brown concludes that Achebe links the ethnological implications of language to the perceptual conflicts between the colonized and the colonizer. Since religion pays a crucial role in this conflict Brown makes a big omission by failing to give it the emphasis it deserves. Now have others critics taken the religious theme much further?

In a new critical work, 'The Politics of Interpretation: The Novels of Chinua Achebe', one of the most recent essays on Achebe, Kofi Owusu's (1991) interest is the use and abuse of power by Achebe's protagonists. Through the main characters of each of Achebe's novels, he develops the author's “concern with the question of power, his fascination with both tradition and change, and his rendition of religious and cultural conflicts [which] have never been divorced from his keen interest in the politics of literary interpretation” (460). Owusu, thus, joins Bernh Lindfors who, in his article “The Palm-oil with which Achebe’ s Words are Eaten”, is primarily keen on establishing the aesthetic parameters that enhance Achebe's fame and achievement as he works from Things Fall Apart to A Man of the People, giving details on the artistry and craftsmanship of the Nigerian novelist.

Since Achebe's literary talents have been examined sufficiently, we are more anxious to explore the theme of religion in Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God. What is its role in the African novel? And how does Achebe succeed to bring it to light? If we take the example of the ancestors, before the coming of the white man they have always had an essential place in the African cosmology. They had been located between God and the human beings in the mystical

http://www.casestudiesjournal.com
hierarchy. Human beings consider the ancestors to be always close to them. Humans believe that the ancestors will help them whenever they are in need. The African wisdom is spread in the community through oral transmission. In the traditional religious beliefs, an ancestor is not only a member of a family many generations back; there are famous forefathers who had owned supernatural powers.

Before the coming of whites, the Igbo communities lived in independent village groups. Apart from the language, they shared in common, these people also shared the same rituals and oracles. Though they believed in many gods, special emphasis is made in terms of respecting ancestors and magic. As Professor Anene (1966) asserts:

“No study of the Ibo is intelligible without a clear appreciation of the pervasive reality of the supernatural world. Among the Ibo, religion, law and custom were believed to have been handed down from the spirit world, from time immemorial, from ancestor to ancestor ...” (12-13).

The Igbo believe strongly in their ancestral religion. There is hardly any serious life activity in the society which is not very intimately punctuated by a religious exercise or expression. The entire life of the people follows a pattern that marks a cycle from birth to death, in which life begins and ends with religious practices.

On their part, Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono, Amadi, Asare Konadu, have shown that even before the Europeanization of Black West Africa, there was a certain kind of Religious awareness. In Konadu's book, *Ordained by the Oracle*, for example, the old religious customs are treated with regard. They have an influence on the villagers. But these ancestral beliefs start to lose their importance and power after the colonial encounter. On their part too, Laye, Achebe, Amadi and Armah are “ambassadors” of their different countries, areas, customs, traditions and cultures. They can be grouped according to their thought and ideology. Among the four, Camara Laye, the Guinean, is the oldest, born in 1928. He is followed by Achebe the Nigerian, 1930; then Elechi Amadi, another Nigerian, 1934; and Ayi Kwei Armah the Ghanaian, 1939. The first three are classified in the first generation of West African writers, while the last one is among the second generation of Anglophone African writers and one of the most famous Ghanaian novelists to date. Their six selected novels are chosen according to the importance they give the religious theme in the whole corpus of the West African fiction.

**Assessment of the selected writers' novels.**

Camara Laye's *The African Child* (1953) came five years before the independence of his country. It is the novel in which he gives his most composite view of traditional religion. After that novel, Laye did go on to write other novels: *A Dream of Africa* (1970), *The Radiance of the King* (1965) and *The Guardian of the Word* (1980). But little of traditional religion features with any prominence in these later works. For instance, *A Dream of Africa* is preoccupied with Laye's exile experience in Europe, *The Radiance of the King* shows remarkable influence of the Czech writer Frantz Kafka, in its exploration of the quest theme. *The Guardian of the Word* 'tells of the powerful medieval empire of Mali and its magnificent warrior founded Mari Diata' (Blurb of *The Guardian of the Word*). By portraying the traditional religion through his father's supernatural power, Camara Laye contributes to the expansion of the African cultural identity and by the same occasion fights the doctrine of assimilation which has implied that the French culture was superior, and that Africans should abandon their own culture to become Frenchmen.

An attempt has been made by several critics to examine the relationship between the gods and human beings in the work of Elechi Amadi. Eustace Palmer's book review accomplishes a comparison of *The Concubine* and *Efuru* by Flora Nwapa, and mentions the theme of 'man's complex relationship with the gods and the supernatural'. He says that man seems to be merely the plaything of the gods and the supernatural' (1968: 56-58). But given the brevity of Palmer's review, he could not develop in any extensive manner how charms serve as a major force and an important theme in Amadi's works. Cur concern in this work is to fill this omission. Even Margaret Laurence fails to talk about the substantiality of charms in Amadi’s earliest writings. She joins Palmer's ideas, when she says that the gods are to blame, if the tragedy of Ihuoma is considered in *The Concubine*. She also affirms that 'Amadi's first novel is about man's struggle with faith itself, his perpetual attempt to placate and therefore to control his gods' (Laurence, 1968: 177).

Like his pair Palmer and Laurence, Emmanuel Obiechina's viewpoint in his book, *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel*, by-passes the value of charms in Amadi's works. He has put forward the importance of the gods rather than that of the charms. ‘Even when the gods intervene they strike a man down’; Obiechina writes, ‘there is no struggle; the blow is hardly audible, it is sudden, sharp and decisive and life continues to flow on as if nothing happens' (1975: 146). Neither does Bernice Niero Avebo Idigbe also, in her M.A. thesis, *Tragic Vision in Elechi Amadi, Chinua Achebe and John Munoye*, take advantage of Obiechina's omission to develop the 'primacy' of charms in Amadi’s earliest fictions. She emphasizes the relationship between the gods and society, where the
inhabits, 'gripped by a paralysing fear of the gods, …, become authors of their ruin' (1985: v-vi). Idigbe's concern with characterization - the study of the relationship between the gods, the dibias and the villagers, could be followed by the examination of the effectiveness of the charms.

Alfred Kiema's essay, 'The Fantastic Narrative in Elechi Amadi's Works: Narrating and Narrator', accentuates Amadi's narrative technique only, especially the description and the dialogue, rather than debating the force of charms. Kiema thinks that the religious, social, and cultural norms of Amadi's society cannot be described properly, 'Without making his novels appear as sociological or anthropological documents', if they are not presented in a dialogue form. He adds that ‘…the reader is left to hesitate between the statements of a narrator who says one thing while the characters state something else' (Kiema, 1990: 89).

So, from the above contributions, we notice a noticeable gap in critical attention to Amadi's works. The evocation of traditional religion in Amadi's writings has two purposes: First it evokes the reader to witness the African Past, and second it stands for a shield against the colonial prejudice that Africans are mindless without any form of organization, and living in a dark continent, a vision of Africa that remains in the mind of some Europeans till date. Amadi himself says that:

In the past certain crimes were interwoven with religion and a belief in the supernatural. For want of a better name, such crimes are here referred to as 'supernatural' crimes. In pre-colonial Nigeria witchcraft was regarded as the most heinous crime anyone could commit (1982: 21).

It is one of the African writer's duties and purposes to prove that even before the coming of invaders, the Africans had their own institutions and ideas of ruling. Amadi understands it and is working in that direction.

Despite the centrality that Armah gives traditional religion in Fragments, his second novel, critics have not yet examined the place of religion in Africa's subjugation during the colonial encounter, as presented by Ayi Kwei Armah in that novel. Robert Fraser's book develops the idea of betrayal and loss through an analysis of the characters in Fragments, but he does not emphasize this all-important aspect of that encounter - the undoing of the black race through the subversion of her religious beliefs. In his essay titled 'Patterns of Decadence, Visions of Regeneration in Armah's Fragments', O.S. Ogede correctly observes that 'in Fragments Armah's technique is to explore the root causes of the patterns of social and political decay in Africa, using the example of Ghana' (1991: 532). But he does not make detailed analysis of Armah’s religious theme. As for Lemuel Johnson, in his paper 'The Middle Passage in African Literature', he argues that 'Armah's Fragments mutes the political thrust of the view that emphasize in the study of the relationship between the gods, the dibias and the villagers, could be followed by the examination of the effectiveness of the charms.

[Armah] finds, to his utter dismay, that Ghana has been infected extensively by the cargo cult disease. Traces of this are found in the elaborate and exhibitionist ceremonies at the airport to mark the homecoming of Brempong, and in the wasteful and fatal outdoing (naming) ceremony of Baako's sister's five-day-old baby in spite of its premature birth. Also, Baako is put off by the discovery of the need for connections in order to secure a job. Equally sickening to him is the lack of the sense of responsibility and the consequent gross inefficiency in the Ghanavision (1985: 127).

Ashaolu is more interested in the idea of the Cargo Cult, so he deals with the myth of the been-to in the image of Brempong who is proud to behave like the westerners and to use European products. He also raises the problem of corruption and nepotism in Armah's work, but he is generally silent on the theme of religion. D.S Izevbaye does not also talk about the theme of traditional religious beliefs in his Essay, 'Ayi Kwei Armah and the “I” of the Beholder', which focuses on the depiction of individualism as a symbol of imperfection, 'a fragment from the whole' (1975: 237). Kofi Anyidoho, in his Essay 'Ayi Kwei Armah and the Journey of the Mind', by-passes the nullification of the traditional rites in Fragments. He develops the cyclicity expressed by Naana and ‘Baako Onipa’s lonely journey [which is] frustrated by a lack of clear purpose and by various other journeys that run counter his own' (1 989: 114).

Conclusion
To conclude, one can affirm that the theme of religious conflict is discussed in Armah’s fiction as it is debated in the novels of Amadi, Laye, and Achebe. This topic on religious clash is dominant in these authors' works. The
selected novels of the four selected writers Amadi, Armah, Achebe and Laye, are examined with the view to
demonstrating their portrait of the role of ancestral religion in traditional society as well as its encounter with the
European civilisation. Though the selected writers expose the theme differently, they converge on the same target, the
claim of African cultural identity.

References

Emmanuel Obiechina, 1979. ‘The Human Dimension of History in AOG.’ *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*.