

REDEFINING AFRICAN RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

Various postcolonial critics have addressed the issue of undermining African traditional beliefs and viewing them as inferior to Western values. Both Bhabha and Said have approached this issue in terms of the rejection of polarization which ultimately favours the majority, and have, in their writings, challenged some assumptions and canon that, under the pretext of false universality, push Western ideas as the basis of judgment. The consequence of this is the inferiorisation of the values of the postcolonial subjects, which include their culture, religion and other aspects, rooting in their minds the assumption that their practices are superstitious and evil. This paper seeks to redefine the African Traditional Religion in Contemporary African literature, examining its representation by the selected contemporary African authors: Adichie and Emezi while attempting a criticism of its role in the fictional contemporary African societies presented by these authors. It takes the postcolonial approach to deconstruct the negative assumptions provided in the process of polarization and redefines the African religion not as impeccable but as one also worthy of the same regard given to Western religion.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Religion, Polarisation

Introduction

Homi Bhabha posits that what is 'theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences (The Location of Culture 2). Based on his argument that cultural difference has taken precedence over cultural diversity, with the former accommodating the stereotypes and prejudice associated with cultural contact, Bhabha opines that there is a need to take into consideration these differences articulated at the point of contact. For him, cultures are never 'unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in the relation of Self to Other' (Bhabha 52). This is in accordance with Frantz Fanon's perspective of culture as a political struggle, the 'zone of occult instability where the people dwell' (Quoted in Bhabha 52). The implication of this is that culture changes and, therefore, cannot be seen as authentic in regard to cultural diversity. However, it cannot also be described by placing it as an opposite of another culture, bearing in mind that this has been the practice of the Western metatheory, consequently pushing the minority to a position of inferiority. Fanon addresses this in *The Wretched of the Earth*, where he identifies the colonial world as a Manichaean one, where 'values are, in fact, irreversibly poisoned and infected as soon as they come into contact with the colonized' (53). Similarly, Edward Said recognises this in *Orientalism*, where he explains the concept of Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (3). Whether it is termed: Orientalism, binary opposition, Manichaeism or polarity, a similar idea is projected by these postcolonial scholars and critics who play a vital role in the process of decolonisation. As is seen in 'The Ekwensu Semantics and the Igbo Christian Theolinguistics,' a criticism of Opat's Ekwensu in the Igbo Imagination: A Heroic Deity or Christian Devil, 'Religion is a cultural product' (Ezeh 476) and each culture answers the 'questions posed by religion in its way' (476). This paper derives a good part of its analysis from this idea posed by Opat, whereby there is a need to deconstruct the canonical judgment of viewing the African culture as a foil to the Western, with a focus on the African Traditional religion which has borne the brunt of this binary opposition. However, Bhabha's key idea of defining theories in the now also plays a crucial role in this paper. Bearing in mind that the African traditional culture cannot be completely defined as its original self since it has encountered other cultures by virtue of colonialism, this present study seeks to redefine it in terms of its representation in selected contemporary African literature texts. It does not return to the precolonial era to examine works like *Things Fall Apart* but rather aims to locate the place of African traditional religion in contemporary African literature.

Theoretical Framework And Methodology

This paper makes use of postcolonial theory, which is a counter-discourse, to deconstruct the idea of the African traditional religion as an embodiment of evil by bringing in the contributions of postcolonial critics like Bhabha, Said, Fanon, Opat, and others who have

made vital contributions to this field of study. It employs the qualitative research method, which calls for subjectivity based on the researcher's perspective. An in-depth analysis of the primary texts: Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji*, will be carried out, along with the contribution of scholars who have studied the postcolonial theory. The documentation will be MLA (Modern Language Association) style, and the analysis will be based on the aforementioned primary texts, capturing the representation of African Traditional Religion by these authors, examining the polarity which has cast it into inferiority, and elevating it as one worthy of reverence.

Textual Analysis

Before delving into the analysis of the primary texts, it is important to examine Opata's argument, which falls in line with Mbonu Ojike's idea that the 'division of humanity into racial categories is futile and in bad faith' (Quoted in Ezech 473):

Races that are categorized along colour lines are conceived...to make possible the stereotyping of the desirable or undesirable along colour lines. In such a racial equation, black is evil and white is good. (Ezech 473)

As Lance Morrow posits, evil is 'anyone outside the tribe. Evil works by dehumanizing the other' (Ezech 478), and this goes in accordance with Bhabha's rejection of polarization and Said's identification of Orientalism as a will to govern over the Orient. The need to divide the self and the other consequently leads to a loss of the authenticity of the other since they are constantly placed as a contrast to the self, their difference-making them an object of mockery and inferiority. The representation of African Traditional Religion by Contemporary African authors takes an approach of deconstructing these negative assumptions described as 'racist biases and Negrophobic mindsets' (Quoted in Ezech 473). In Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, the character of Eugene Achike is described as 'white skin, black masks' (Wa Thiong'o 160) in 'Writing Against Neocolonialism.' He is a man who derives his 'character, power and inspiration from their guardianship of imperialist interests' (160). While it could be reasonably argued that Eugene's incorruptible nature depicts him as a patriotic person, a deeper reading of the work exposes where his loyalties lie, ultimately, with Western ideologies.

At the beginning of the work, the readers are introduced to Eugene, a man who looks up to Father Benedict, a Western priest, who deems the African language unworthy of being used during the liturgical celebrations. Father Benedict insists on having the *kyrie* and *credo* sung only in Latin, with the belief that 'Igbo was not acceptable' (Adichie 12). Papa, who lives his life in mimicry, equates speaking the English language with sounding civilised, and this mentality of his makes him enjoy it when 'the villagers make an effort to speak English around him. He said it showed they had good sense' (68). It is this mentality of Western superiority that drives him to view Father Amadi as someone who is a problem to the church and should be remembered in prayers, all because the young visiting priest breaks

into an Igbo song in the middle of the homily. Although it is not made clear whether Papa's issue is with the song or the language, it is obvious through his other encounters what he thinks of his native language, which is part of his culture. Papa is akin to the class Bhabha describes as 'almost the same but not quite' (127) in *The Location of Culture*. As a mimicry man who can never be the same as the Westerners he tries so hard to imitate, he shows his excesses and slippages and ends up making a mockery of himself in many instances. One of these is seen in the way he suddenly changes his accent while addressing the Western Reverend Sister at Kambili's school and his religious fanaticism, which ends up making him into an object of mockery. He is the 'outsider who wept louder than the bereaved' (Achebe 148) as he goes through extreme measures to fit into the Western system to a point where he not only places himself in a false position of emulation but also begins to judge and views those with different opinions as evil.

The relativity of what is seen as canon and what Adichie terms 'the danger of a single story' comes into play in the mentality held by Kambili for a good part of her life, which centres around traditionalists going to hell when they die. The first mention of Papa-Nnukwu, which introduces him to the world of the novel, is Kambili's recollection of Eugene telling her and Jaja that 'nobody had spent money on his schooling, especially not his Godless father, our Papa-Nnukwu' (47). As is seen not long afterwards, Eugene speaks of his father again in the same negative manner, 'my father spent his time worshipping gods of woods and stone. I would be nothing today but for the priests and sisters at the mission' (55). This creates an image of an embodiment of evil and wickedness in Kambili, who only hears her father's side of the story, making Papa-Nnukwu into a stingy man who would rather spend his time being ungodly than provide for his son. It is, however, ironic that Papa, who accuses his father of not spending money on his schooling, becomes wealthy and treats his father with disdain, banning him from entering his luxurious house, which can 'fit in every man in Abba' (91) in the words of Papa-Nnukwu, and until Papa-Nnukwu complains to the Umunna, stops his father from having contact with his children. Even the money Papa sends to his father is described as 'slim wads of naira through Kevin or one of our Umunna members, slimmer wads than he gave Kevin as a Christmas bonus' (70). It is just akin to the twenty naira notes he throws to the children running after his car on their way to Abba, and to Papa, the traditional religion is equated with evil, a danger to his offspring, which is why he says to his children, 'I don't like to send you to the home of a heathen, but God will protect you' (70).

The power of the narrative makes a dynamic shift to the side of the 'other,' Papa-Nnukwu, who has only been shown all along from the perspective of Eugene when Kambili and Jaja visit his home. There is no reconciliation between what she has come to believe and the reality before her, and what the readers see is a frail old man who has been struck by age and poverty. It is like the symbolic lowering of the high walls of their luxurious houses, which do not let her see the perspectives and sufferings of other people. Outside these high silent walls are cries of suffering people like Papa-Nnukwu and Anikwenwa, who are

victims of Papa's negative narrative and discrimination. Papa-Nnukwu's house is described thus:

Papa-Nnukwu's creaking wooden gate, which was so narrow that Papa might have to enter sideways if he ever were to visit. The compound was barely a quarter of the size of our backyard in Enugu...The house that stood in the middle of the compound was small, compact like a dice, and it was hard to imagine Papa and Auntie Ifeoma growing up here. It looked just like the pictures of houses I used to draw in kindergarten: a square house with a square door at the centre and two square windows on each side. (Adichie 71)

Papa-Nnukwu's house is so uninhabitable that the first time Kambili and Jaja visit, the latter walks in looking for the bathroom, only to be shown to the outhouse, a 'closet-size building of unpainted cement blocks with a mat of entwined palm fronds pulled across the gaping entrance' (71). Even his singlet is 'browned by age and yellowed at the armpits' (72), and his food is 'flaky fufu and watery soup bereft of chunks of fish or meat...' (72). Kambili finds herself searching for signs of 'difference, of Godlessness' (71), but she does not see any. However, due to the strong mentality which has been rooted in her by Papa, she believes that they are somewhere, that they 'had to be' (71). By implication, Kambili is at crossroads as she is unable to reconcile the beliefs she has been taught with the reality of Papa-Nnukwu simply being an old man who worships his gods and stays out of others' ways. He is not the evil sinner who would be banished to hell, but she starts to see him as a person.

The words of Auntie Ifeoma to Kambili come into place here, 'sometimes what was different was just as good as what was familiar' (173), and Kambili understands this when she has the opportunity to live in the same house as Papa-Nnukwu and witnesses his *itu-nzu*, his declaration of innocence where he prays for his children, including Eugene who abandons him. Kambili is surprised to observe that Papa-Nnukwu prays for Eugene with the same sincerity he uses to pray for Auntie Ifeoma. On the one hand, therefore, is Eugene, a self-acclaimed moralist who fails to exercise the words written on Mama's shirt, 'GOD IS LOVE' (15), but is a perpetrator of domestic violence and discrimination, while on the other hand is Papa-Nnukwu, an old man whom Eugene is bent on tagging an embodiment of evil, but not once is he seen judging people or praying for the death of his enemies. Kambili sees similarities between his shrine and that of Our Lady of Lourdes, just as Auntie Ifeoma tells her that his morning prayer is like when they say the rosary. Until his last breath, Papa-Nnukwu believes it is the missionaries who have misled his son, thereby laying the blame off Eugene, an adult capable of making his own decisions. However, just as Auntie Ifeoma tells him, she also attains a high level of education but does not judge people of other beliefs or insult her father. Her garden in Nsukka is symbolic of her generosity and open-mindedness, where both Catholics and protestants are allowed to pluck flowers for their service. The result of this is seen in her children, who freely express their opinions without fear, unlike Eugene's house where Mama is beaten till she has a miscarriage because she

admits to feeling too sick to greet the priest, and Kambili and Jaja live in fear of their father, whispering and communicating with their eyes.

Similarly, Father Amadi, who plays a significant role in Kambili's emotional growth, is portrayed as an individual who can balance a human heart with morality. It is pertinent to note that although he is a missionary priest, he never demands of Papa-Nnukwu to convert and does not share Papa's beliefs that Papa-Nnukwu is going to be doomed for following the ways of the ancestors. Rather, he speaks to Papa-Nnukwu with respect and even helps Auntie Ifeoma transport him to Nsukka when he falls sick. He is attainable, a person, which goes in contrast with what Kambili has grown to associate with priests due to people like Father Benedict. He plays football with the boys at the stadium, and as he tells Kambili, he sees Christ in their faces. However, Kambili is again conflicted due to her beliefs, such that she is unable to reconcile the 'blond Christ hanging on the burnished cross in St. Agnes and the sting-scarred legs of those boys' (185). Kambili's formation under the guidance of her father and Father Benedict prepares her to form a mindset of viewing God as a Western man, evidence of which is observed in her thought of God laying out the hills of Nsukka with 'his wide white hands' (138). It is also of this mindset of God as Eurocentric that Kambili is surprised when Auntie Ifeoma prays that the Blessed Virgin intercedes for Papa-Nnukwu, and the Angels take charge of him. This leads her to pose the question of whether 'Our Lady' can 'intercede on behalf of a heathen' (173).

Opata posits in *Ekwensu in the Igbo Imagination: A Heroic deity or Christian Devil* that the God-Devil binary in the Judaic and Christian worldviews is absent in the Igbo traditional religion, and the Igbos approach the problem of evil from an 'engagingly original position to which the most respected of thinkers anywhere on this planet should doff their hat' (Quoted in Ezech 474). As he opines again, religion is a 'cultural product' (Ezech 476) and 'each culture answers the questions posed by religion in its way' (476). The need for polarization to inflict what Opata calls a 'cultural intimidation' (Qtd in Ezech 475) coupled with mistranslation is what led to the association of evil with Ekwensu, a deity in the Igbo traditional religion, known for generosity and benevolence. The implication is that everything about the African Traditional Religion becomes associated with evil, placing it as a foil to that of the Christian religion.

In accordance with Opata's postulations about each culture answering the question of religion in its way, we examine Afigbo's idea of the appropriation of heaven and hell where he writes:

The Igbo cosmogony has a totally different view of the after-life. Life simply continues and to die was simply a transition that made the deceased an incorporeal member of his/her kith and kin. (Qtd in Ezech 477)

Afigbo's idea of reincarnation is where the central idea of Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* is located. Vivek is born with a scar on the feet of Ahunna, his grandmother, and

when his father, Chika, holds him in his arms, it is described that Chika feels ‘something building in him slowly...’(15). However, he ignores this feeling, and the next day, a messenger comes to announce the death of Ahunna, who passed away the previous day. Throughout the short life lived by Vivek, the signs of his difference from the rest of the people are there, but unfortunately, the methods used to attempt to make him fit in are not effective because everyone turns away from the possibility of the reality which they deem superstitious. It is, however, ironic that Mary’s church would employ the method of extreme exorcism aimed at beating the demon out of him, but no one would consider him a reincarnation of his grandmother. It is a case of viewing evil as ‘anyone outside the tribe’ (Qtd in Ezech 478). There is belief in demons and angels, but the idea of reincarnation becomes controversial and superstitious for the sole reason of it not being a part of one’s faith.

The effect of this lack of acceptance as the grandmother who has come to life again in Vivek is that Vivek feels like a ‘piece that didn’t match anything else’ (Emezi 79). He tells Osita about his dream where he is their grandmother; he looks in the mirror, and she is there, just like in the pictures, and she speaks to him in Igbo, saying, ‘Hold my life for me’ (Emezi 115). He goes further to ask if Osita believes in reincarnation. There are so many signs that Vivek is different, but his father is only focused on having him look masculine and cutting his long hair, while his mother is afraid of how people would hurt him for looking the way he does. Even at his funeral, the programme is designed with pictures of him as a child, as if the person behind it intends to pretend as though he were someone else (Emezi 146). In the end, when the truth about his death starts to unravel, it is discovered that he lived his last few moments in his true skin, as a reincarnation of Ahunna, and tells his friends to address him as Nnemdi, a name Ekene suggests at his birth as an Igbo middle name, a name which refers to Mama because of the scar on his feet (157). When Chika and Kavita, his parents, first hear this, they believe it is a mental illness that drives Vivek to dress that way, a denial which stems from their lack of understanding of a belief they do not share.

In the end, Vivek is finally able to bear the name, Nnemdi when the inscription on his grave is changed to ‘Vivek Nnemdi Oji Beloved Child’ (172). He mentions that his ‘grandmother, floating somewhere here with me, is happy to be acknowledged at last’ and goes ahead to say, ‘I was born and died. I will come back (172).

Conclusion And Recommendation

The acceptance of a different belief system is quite difficult, especially when one already has a strong ideology, but as is observed in this study, the difference does not imply a threat or evil but rather could be viewed as another perspective. The similarity between the characters of the two primary texts could be seen in their struggles to come to terms with an idea which does not go in line with ideologies rooted in their mentalities all their lives. However, like Auntie Ifeoma, Father Amadi and Vivek’s friends, there is a need to strike a

balance where one can choose to have their own beliefs but understand and respect a different one. The findings of this research paper have proven that evil can be relative, and what is not understood does not imply the presence of evil. There is a need to redescribe the African Traditional Religion in its authenticity, ridding it of polarity, which forms negative assumptions. Therefore, other scholars could as well continue with this research in other aspects and deconstruct other canons which place the culture of the postcolonial subject in a state of inferiority. By doing this, many other good practices could be upheld, and it will improve the mindset of the postcolonial subject, to have the awareness that their own culture deserves the same level of reverence given to the Western, for both are not impeccable, but have their beautiful aspects.

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