

Santa Clara University

Scholar Commons

English

College of Arts & Sciences

4-11-2013

The Gods Who Speak in Many Voices, and in None: African Novelists on Indigenous and Colonial Religion

John C. Hawley

Santa Clara University, jhawley@scu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/engl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hawley, J. C. (2013). The Gods Who Speak in Many Voices, and in None: African Novelists on Indigenous and Colonial Religion. In E. J. West and C. P. Marsh-Lockett (Eds.), *Literary Expressions of African Spirituality* (pp. 15-34) Lexington Press.

Copyright © 2013 Lexington Books. Reproduced by permission of [Rowman & Littlefield](#). All rights reserved. Please contact the publisher for permission to copy, distribute or reprint.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact rscroggin@scu.edu.

TWO

The Gods Who Speak in Many Voices, and in None: African Novelists on Indigenous and Colonial Religion

John C. Hawley

"Peoples of African descent in the Americas," writes Joseph M. Murphy, "share a common history as Africans, and this identity has had to develop itself against crushing attempts to destroy it" (177).¹ But this tradition—or, more accurately, these traditions—did not end when slaves were brought through the middle passage and deposited in plantations: Africans in the nineteenth, twentieth, and now twenty-first century, though remaining behind, arguably had Europe and America brought to them willy-nilly, and had to live with the varying degrees of influence that this brought—and continues to bring. "African peoples today," writes Jacob K. Olupona, "especially the elders, look at their classical religious heritage with a nostalgia for a paradise lost" (xv). Their tribal identities, then their national composite identities, brought with them varying religious traditions and coping mechanisms, varying capacities for adaptation, and these have now been adumbrated by contact with traditions that denigrated those that had sufficed for centuries. Among the crises attendant upon colonization has been the often violent confrontation between Christianity or Islam and indigenous African religions.

These relationships were not, and are not, simple. As Olupona notes, for example, "it is very difficult to continue to call Islam and Christianity in Africa foreign religions because they have been thoroughly changed and adapted to African taste and sensibility" (xv).² At the same time, it is not the case that the assault, if one may so describe any missionary process, is a thing of the past, since in a globalized world the relations be-

tween African churches and mosques and those outside the continent are, if anything, more robust. Similarly, Olupona summarizes the common elements in indigenous African religious experience as "ancesthood, multiplicity of gods, medicine, divination, sacred kingship, rituals, and festivals" (xvii; see also Chidester), and these, clearly, are all under strain in the contemporary world—but not necessarily from Christianity, and perhaps not from Islam, at least not with the energy formerly seen. Instead, those two religions seem more intent on each other: whereas conversions to Christianity and Islam initially resulted principally in a greater climate of religious plurality in most parts of the continent, "today new forms of Islamic and Christian traditions are becoming highly intolerant of each other and are creating a new crisis as they attack this last bastion of peaceful coexistence in communities" (xvii). In such a climate, novelists may be providing a less contentious consideration of whatever spiritual elements continue to appeal to elements of their societies.

The subject of this essay, then, is the enduring spiritualities of Africa (including "imports"), their varying levels of success in meeting the challenges of engagement with non-African cultures, and, particularly, the manifestations of these encounters in a representative sampling of its fiction. In the first wave of novels in English and French, African religion typically loses out to Christianity and Islam in much the same process that village economies fail before railroads and missionary schools. In more recent fiction, more worldly-wise Africans (whether as characters of novels, or as writers of those novels who have been educated abroad) turn a more appreciative (if not necessarily naïve) eye back on indigenous religion as a less-encumbered source for contemplation of a universal human need for transcendence and an imminent power that is not materialistic. The resulting personal crisis posed by competing cultural ties is nicely summarized by V.Y. Mudimbe's protagonist in *Between Tides*: "I entered the great seminary. Yet my uncle was waiting to introduce me to my past. How to combine two upbringings?" (129).

INDIGENOUS RELIGION

"Long before the religion of the crescent or the religion of the cross arrived on the African continent," writes Ali A. Mazrui, "Africa was at worship, its sons and daughters were at prayer. . . . In indigenous religion, Man was not created in the image of God; nor must God be conceived in the image of Man. The universe and the force of life are all manifestations of God" (135). In other words, African culture is traditionally imbued with a sensitivity to the presence of the divine: such a sensibility is not imposed from afar, but arises from Africans themselves.

Perhaps the most delightful incorporation of animist and other indigenous African religions into fiction is in the work of Ben Okri (see Hawley

1995), though it plays a major role as well in an earlier generation of novelists. Okri's novels deal with the *abiku*, the child with one foot in this world and the other foot in the world of spirits. In this figure Okri has found an ideal embodiment of the concept of divine and sacred being intermixed. As Olupona puts it, "the significance of this interaction is that there is no clear-cut distinction between religious and secular spheres or perspective of the ordinary life experience" (xvii). Thus, a westerner reading *The Famished Road* (1991) or its sequel, *Songs of Enchantment* (1993), will have little choice but to enter the disorienting perception of the protagonist, the *abiku*, who easily moves in and out of the rational world: he notes, for example, after a particularly confusing scene in a bar, that "we left the edge of reality, the fairyland that no one could see, and went home through the swaying night" (Okri 213). The child only gradually learns to translate this "natural" fairyland into a metaphor for the unjust and overpowering political world around him, the neocolonial net of persecution of the poor by the rich that crushes his father. His father tells him very near the book's end that "I am beginning to see things for the first time. This world is not what it seems. There are mysterious forces everywhere. We are living in a world of riddles" (388). But here the unseen forces are not those of the spirit world: the spirit world that had been familiar to all during the earlier generation's childhood had, by now, been infected and manipulated by the even-more-powerful forces of capitalism, industrialism, railroads, corruption, party bosses. *Abikus* are bizarre, indeed, in such a depressingly secular world of total imminence, and one senses that Okri employs the metaphor not because he himself is an animist in any traditional sense, but because it expresses a truer spiritual experience than any institutional religion does for him.³

From an earlier generation (and possibly an inspiration for Okri), *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) is Amos Tutuola's groundbreaking and idiosyncratic tale of a man traveling in the land of the dead. It is far less comfortable reading for a western audience, since it transgresses traditional grammatical and narratological rule—whether intentionally or because Tutuola was less educated becomes, for some, an interesting criterion for situating the book in the accepted canon. This was followed by *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), similarly set as a young man's journey through the world of the dead. Westerners will surely read these novels as journeys of self-discovery: "I told them further," writes the protagonist in *Bush of Ghosts*, "that it is in the Bush of Ghosts the 'fears', 'sorrows', 'difficulties', all kinds of the 'punishments' etc. start and there they end" (Tutuola 1954: 174). As Divine Che Neba puts it, "the journey motif [in Tutuola], and the general mythical situation surrounding it, clearly shows man's inability to unveil the hidden agenda of the gods" (8). Tutuola had a woman undertake a similar quest into the underworld in his next two novels, *Simbi and the Satyr of the Black Jungle* (1955) and *The Brave African Huntress* (1958). His late novels were also set in a mysterious land

of ghosts: *The Witch-Herbalist of the Remote Town* (1981), *The Wild Hunter in the Bush of Ghosts* (1982), and *Pauper, Bawler, and Slander* (1987). The settings and themes of his works were not particularly influenced by Western literature (at least, in comparison with the more valorized African writers of his day), and were more obviously celebrations and reinterpretations of Yoruba myths and culture, fires in which Nigerians typically refined their understanding of their place in the world. As Bernth Lindfors has noted, "*The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, a lineal descendant of Yoruba oral tradition, hails from a large extended family of West African oral narrative. . . . One suspects that his roots in oral tradition run so deep that he knows of no other way to compose book-length fiction" (640). In fact, from one novel to the next, "Tutuola appears to have continued to rely more heavily on traditional Yoruba material than on non-Yoruba material" (643).⁴ And this may be one reason that his books meet with such mixed criticism in the west: how does one grapple with this "foreign" voice? Is Tutuola a more "authentic" spokesman for African indigenous spirituality than an assimilated Okri?

Similar questions surround another author from Tutuola's generation: Asare Konadu wrote *Ordained by the Oracle* (1969), he said, as "a study in transliteration of some funeral rites of communities in Ghana" (Lorentzan 31). It was first published for a Ghanaian audience, and in that edition is subtitled "a husband's confession and ritual." Like so much African fiction, the novel deals with the encroachment of western culture, here expressed in the protagonist's doubts about the need to perform lengthy mourning rituals, and shows how the rituals can still play a meaningful role in his life. He has acquired relative wealth, but in the process has wandered into materialism; his return to ancestral rituals reawakens in him a spirituality that reminds him of an earlier time of greater integration. At the same time, the novel recognizes a process whereby traditions can be adapted over time. At one point, for example, one character tells another that

"Things have changed since my youth. For instance, nobody went to the shrine on Tuesdays; not even to the farm. But today people walk the area in defiance because they call themselves Christians. . . . [My youth] was the time people could go to the shrine and peep into a little pool of water standing between two stones and see their future before them."

"That would be wonderful."

"Yes. It went on for some time and people who saw grim futures came home and killed themselves. That was why it was stopped. Now the oracles talk in proverbs and they leave the person concerned to interpret the proverb."

"But things said in proverbs can have different meanings" (119).

The open-ended nature of personal interpretation, so different from the dogmatic certainty of institutionalized religion, is here portrayed as a

strength of traditional religion—and, perhaps surprisingly, is a characteristic that the book's protagonist comes to accept only over some time. The novel (first published as *Come Back Dora!*) concludes with a somewhat animistic overtone, at the end of the funeral day:

It was nearly midnight when he rose to go to bed. He surveyed the bedroom. The place did not have the coolness and attraction it had before. His bed, a double divan, stood in the middle of the room, with a chest of drawers next to it. The articles were selected by Dora and as he stood surveying the room he could see in them the face and hands of Dora instead of the young woman standing by him.

Boateng looked at his second wife intensely and inquired inaudibly, "Oh Dora, when shall I see you?"

The answer came in rattling rain on the zinc roof. (188)

The atmosphere that Konadu creates, with a sorrowing protagonist listening for his wife's spirit in the sound of rain, nicely encapsulates the sort of experience Okri describes when his mother died: "many, many things are exposed for not being deep enough in the way they were meant to help us cope with the more extreme vicissitudes of the human experience. . . . I remember at the time finding myself having to hold on to solid things like walls and lampposts, and found they weren't solid enough. I'd lean against a tree and find it wasn't solid enough. . . . All the physical things, all the things we turn to for sustenance and support, I found to be quite hopeless and quite empty" (Mooney).

The search for some meaning in the emptiness informs Konadu's work. Of his five novels, several deal with issues of the conflict between competing values: traditional or modern. In *Ordained by the Oracle*, for example, a character concludes that "we are tearing everything from the surface of the earth, including our own lives" (176). In *The Wizard of Assamang* (1964) there is a question of different marriage ceremonies and the value of being a wizard; *Shadow of Wealth* (1966) the corruption of modern business demands is central, and in *The Lawyer Who Bungled His Life* (1965) a "modern" lawyer is plagued by his two wives who are using juju against each other.

Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* (1970) is similar to Tutuola's works in its journey motif, its metaphorical story, and its condemnation of the loss of wholeness that has come with greed. "Our fathers' insides always contained things straight. They did straight things. Our insides were also clean and we did the straight things until the new time came" (50). The new time, of course, is his description of the corruption of Africans that has accompanied the exploitation of Africa by western enterprises. Later in the novel an older woman complains that "This time girls are not like us be when we were girls" (102), and another worries that "money is inside everything in Sologa" (104).

This theme of a split in generational contact with traditional religion and customs plays itself out in a good many novels of the 1960s, as in Ousmane Sembène's *God's Bits of Wood* (1960).⁵ This is the story of the 1947-1948 strike on the Dakar-Niger railway line, and in his recounting of it Sembène makes the community itself, rather than any one individual, into the protagonist. He does not valorize an unrealistic dream of returning to the way things were before the Europeans came, but he does suggest what would be lost if that world were totally overthrown by modernization. He has one elder ruminate on how the world was changing: "In her time," he writes, "the young people undertook nothing without the advice of their elders, but now, alone, they were deciding on a strike. . . . [W]hat did Niakoro mean to these women, occupied only with the passing hour? She was just a leftover from a vanished time, slowly being forgotten" (34-35). But by novel's end the women from one generation join hands with those of another, and find a solidarity in opposing the colonial powers. Writing from a Marxist perspective, Karen Sacks suggests that Sembène "bids us to liberate the revolutionary potential embedded in very unrevolutionary daily life" (370), and in this novel it is the women who lead the way into a future that embraces past values and present realities: "A few minutes later a murmur of excitement rippled across the crowd, as the women of Thiès came in through the main entrance gate. Their long journey together had been an effective training school. . . . Behind them came the mass of strikers" (316-317). However, while he was a committed Marxist in his early years, Sembène eventually saw a greater need to find a truly African voice through the various arts, a voice that would be at least as intelligible to Africans as it would be to Europeans. There is no doubt that African religion comes under attack in Sembène's work for the "fatalistic resignation" (Aire 73) that they preach, and Sembène (like Matthew Arnold before him) holds out greater hope for native imagination and (unlike Arnold) resistance.

The most sophisticated attempt to synthesize European philosophy and literary motifs with indigenous religion is in the work of Wole Soyinka, who is critical of both, but also appreciative.⁶ His most sustained treatment of related topics is in *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (1976), which focuses on Yoruba rituals against the backdrop of Greek drama. The results are interesting, if a bit strained, as may be suggested by the book's poetic but dense conclusion: "Poised on the heights of the physical mountain-home of Ogun," he writes, "[the devotee] experiences a yawning gulf within him, a menacing maul of chthonic strength yawning ever wider to annihilate his being; he is saved only by channeling the dark torrent into the plastic light of poetry and dance; not, however, as a reflection or illusion of reality, but as the celebrative aspects of the resolved crisis of his god" (160).

South Africa's Zakes Mda, initially most notable as a playwright, presents a newer generation's approach to indigenous traditions, some-

times using bizarre incidents and syncretic religious movements as an irrational counter to Christianity—more, it would seem, to clear the decks than to limn a new mythology.⁷ Most favorably received has been *The Heart of Redness* (2000), which recounts two stories: the first is the cattle-killing incident in the 1850s that involved a messianic movement among the Xhosa in the Eastern Cape. The teenaged leader of this group had commanded, disastrously, that her followers apocalyptically kill their cattle and burn crops, offering the promise that once they had done so, their dead ancestors would rise up and drive the Europeans from the land. Those who followed the prophet are the Believers, and those who opposed her are the Unbelievers. The book's second story is in contemporary times, and deals with the descendents of these two groups. Mda ironically casts the earlier Unbelievers as total materialists in today's world, who have a new faith of their own: in progress. But, while certainly describing the Believers and their descendents as irrational, Mda is predictably harsh in portraying the contemporary materialists who, he suggests, are being led as far astray as were the Believers in earlier times.

She Plays with the Darkness (1995) is a mysterious story involving a brother and sister with strange connections and inexplicable meanings; but there is only the most tenuous sense of hope involved in this ephemeral tale. She, "the keeper of memories" (169) never ages, for instance, and apparently embodies her peoples' oldest (pre-colonial) religious traditions:

When she was not in her room playing with the darkness, she went to wherever dancing could be found. She was seen at the tlhophe dances, where the drums of the mathuela diviners throbbed. She danced alongside the Zionists as they drummed themselves into a frenzy, possessed by Holy Spirits. She joined the mokgibo dancers as they responded to the rhythm of a lone drum interwoven with singing, whistling and handclapping. She danced with the little girls, who could easily have been her grandchildren although she didn't look much older than them, in the songs of the pumpkin and the monyanyako dance. She danced the dances of the men: the fast-paced ndlamu of the Matebele, and the graceful mohobelo with both its SeMolapo and SeMatsieng variations. She even danced the famo dance of the fuchu parties of the night, to the rhythm of the organ or accordion and drums (170).

Hers is a syncretic spirituality, something akin to the animism that Okri recreates in *Famished Road*, but idiosyncratic and more syncretic.

Ways of Dying (1995) tells the tale of Toloki, a professional mourner who helps families grieve over their dead ones. When he meets Noria they become a conduit for the same sorts of traditions that enliven *She Plays with the Darkness*. She sings, and he paints and sculpts, and together they resurrect hope and inexplicable meaning in the lives of the suffering poor of their community: people come by and, "in the same way that they read meaning in the shack he and Noria built, they say that the work

has profound meaning. As usual, they cannot say what the meaning is. It is not even necessary to say, or even to know, what the meaning is. It is enough only to know that there is a meaning, and it is a profound one" (200). The use of art is reminiscent of Sembène and Soyinka, but with a difference that reflects the recent heritage of violence in South Africa. By becoming artisans of meaning, and channeling the precolonial spirit of their ancestors, they teach their community ways to move beyond despair and the detritus of apartheid ("the children are busy with Toloki's crayons. They are trying to copy the images he has created. . . . Toloki turns to the children and shows them various techniques of drawing better images" [201]). This novel ends with a suggestion that reconciliation among the racial groups can wash away the overdetermined meaning of evil symbols: "Tyres are still burning. Tyres can burn for a very long time. The smell of burning rubber fills the air. But this time it is not mingled with the sickly stench of roasting human flesh. Just pure wholesome rubber" (212). As Marimba Ani notes,

[T]here is a danger of becoming "possessed" ourselves by the very definitions that we have denied. Now that we have broken the power of their [European] ideology, we [Africans] must leave them and direct our energies toward the recreation of cultural alternatives informed by ancestral visions of a future that celebrates our Africaness and encourages the best of the human spirit. Each of the cultures historically victimized by Europe must reclaim its own image. As for those of us who are African, our salvation (redemption) lies in our ancientness and connectedness; not in a romanticized glorification of the past, but in a return to the center in which all contradictions are resolved and from which the spiral of development can continue with clarity. From the center, ikons can be retrieved in our image that will allow us to tap the energy of the collective will of our people (570).

And so it is in Mda's work. His plays, as Jan Gorak insightfully argues, with their "thoroughgoing suspicion of systems of every sort . . . come[] closer to the theatre of the absurd than to the theatre of commitment" (491). Much like Sembène, he has little faith left in political activism or in religion, and instead uses his art to encourage Africans to create anew through dance, song, literature. But even less hopeful than Sembene, "in Mda's plays. . . the characters flicker with intermittent insight within a context of darker noncommunication" (481). Considering the crises of southern Africa in recent years, it is little surprise that he is more reminiscent of Beckett than of Brecht, and the traditions he unearths, which are suggestive of the former power of spirituality in indigenous religion, are now more obviously artistic riffs and paeans to the ever-new power of the imagination.

CHRISTIANITY

In the year 350 Ezana, ruler of the kingdom of Aksum in northeastern Ethiopia, converted to Christianity and declared this to be the state religion. As Ali Mazrui points out, "Africa has both the oldest forms of Christianity, such as those of Egypt and Ethiopia, and some of the newest forms of Christianity such as those of the Kimbanguists" (157). Portuguese Catholics converted the kingdom of Congo in the late fifteenth century. Former slaves from the colonies in north America, who had fled to Canada after supporting England against the colonies' fight for independence, were some of the first protestant missionaries in western Africa in the eighteenth century—most notably, Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther (1806-1891; see George Olakunle). And in the nineteenth century, missionaries from the United States and Europe became very active.

Among the first things on the agenda of these missionaries was the establishment of schools, and this remains a controversial decision: it surely raised the literacy of Africans, but many argue that it demeaned or obliterated the cultures that stood in its path.⁸ Few reasonable individuals would argue that the introduction of Christianity into the sub-Sahara (recalling its existence, from its beginnings, in northern Africa in Hippo and elsewhere)⁹ was an unmitigated plague, but its portrayal in African novels would suggest as much (see, for example, Olakunle; Hawley 1994). Some might argue that this is a bit like Voltaire becoming one of the greatest critics of the Jesuits since, like him, the majority of the early African novelists was educated at schools run by Christian missionaries. Most famous among the African novelists who have dealt with the stifling of African traditions by western colonization is, of course, Chinua Achebe, and most notably in *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Here, and again, as in the case of Soyinka, clearly influenced by Greek drama and its portrayal of *hubris*, the protagonist's inability to adapt leads a noble man to an impossible situation of irrelevance and despair. He particularly loses touch with his son, who is enamored of the new religion, Christianity. One of Achebe's contemporaries, John Munonye, considered many of the same topics, and principally that of the changes wrought on rural individuals when they make contact with European and American culture. *The Only Son* (1966), for example, is a story of a well-meaning boy who seeks a western education to raise his family's standard of living, only to find that he becomes deracinated and alienated from his family. Munonye's *Obi* (1969) expands the focus to a married couple who are torn between traditional religion and Christianity and the modern medicine that comes with it. They eventually choose the latter to solve their infertility, rather than the former, which would have encouraged the man to take a second wife.

Asare Konadu's *Ordained by the Oracle* is typical of the many novels that demonstrate the contention between the old ways and the new de-

mands of Christianity in many African communities. During the funeral ceremonies in that novel one woman is reprimanded for not having properly cropped her hair; when she explains that this is because she is a Christian, she is told that she is not the only Christian in attendance.

"Is it how you are going to behave when I die? You are the people who bring the wrath of our forefathers upon us. The ceremony today is a cleansing act and we expect every one to join in in order to clean this house of every mishap."

"But I am taking part."

"Then do it to our satisfaction. Find someone to cut your hair," the old man said. When, after some time, Abena Duwaa did not do it, the ceremony proceeded without her participation (Konadu 182-83).

She is offered as an example of a self-displacement that may be unnecessary, even though it may be typical of new converts. Indeed, in the contemporary Roman Catholic church in Africa there is a great deal of inspiration from local folk traditions and what might be described by some as syncretism, but by others as the centuries-old tradition of Christianity's assimilation to indigenous religion where it finds compatible insights. Drums and dancing at Mass are small examples.¹⁰ The kind of syncretism that Konadu seems to advocate is expressed at the conclusion of the funeral ceremony at book's end, when an elder tells the mourning husband that "You cannot live with the past all the time," and the husband responds, "But it is from the past that we plan the future" (188). Readers might expect the elder to offer the more conservative advice, and the younger man to look to the future. The fact that the binary advice is coming from the individuals that readers might expect to express just the opposite is a nice irony that unifies the book's suggestion that development is possible and confrontation between traditional religion and Christianity may not be inevitable. Nonetheless, folk traditions are decidedly valorized in the book and Christianity is made to seem foreign.

Mongo Beti's novels are immersed in the presence of Christianity in rural Cameroon, and in *The Poor Christ of Bomba* (1956) he, in effect, offers an African's version of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). In Beti's version, the European who is "lost" to Africa is a priest, one of the more well-meaning in the novel, and therefore one of the more sensitive to the negative impact his work is having on native customs and meaning systems. At the novel's climax Fr. Drumont, on the verge of a nervous breakdown, confronts the cynical French colonial administrator and rejects the work the Church has done in Africa:

"These good people worshipped God without our help. What matter if they worshipped after their own fashion—by eating one another, or by dancing in the moonlight, or by wearing bark charms around their necks? Why do we insist on imposing our customs on them? . . . Why don't the Chinese devote themselves to converting all Paris to Confu-

cianism or Buddhism or whatever? . . . Rationalist Europe, so full of arrogance, science and self-consciousness, filled me with dismay. I chose the disinherited, or those whom I was please to regard as such. How naïve I was; for are not we ourselves the truly disinherited?" (150-51, 153)¹¹

The theme of the questionable good of Christian influence on long-established native customs, such as polygamy, is played out again in *King Lazarus* (1958), where a de-conversion from Christianity is central. In *Mission to Kala* (1957) the confusion and alienation attendant upon conversion to Christianity in the lives of common rural folk in their villages is enacted, though it is portrayed as only one aspect of embracing the "modernization" that comes from assimilating to (in this case) the French colonial system. The effect is fairly complete alienation from the village; in fact, in *Mission to Kala*, it results in an abandonment of any roots, at all, and an entrance into a totally French existentialist worldview:

the tragedy which our nation is suffering today is that of a man left to his own devices in a world which does not belong to him, which he has not made and does not understand. It is the tragedy of man bereft of any intellectual compass, a man walking blindly through the dark in some hostile city like New York. Who will tell him that he can only cross Fifth Avenue by the pedestrian crossings, or teach him how to interpret the traffic signs? How will he solve the intricacies of a subway map, or know where to change trains? (181)

In fact, what the protagonist has embraced, at novel's end, is "my first, perhaps my only, love: the absurdity of life" (183). This is so clearly *not* African, and so obviously individualistic, that any African reader would read it as a strong condemnation of whatever philosophy or theology had led the protagonist to such a conclusion.

Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* (1956) offers a similar theme from a far less sophisticated narrator: the diary of a young man who had fled his male initiation ceremony by taking up residence with a priest. He does all he can to assimilate to the colonialist's culture, and burns all bridges to his former life. But he willy-nilly comes to learn that he is never going to be accepted in this new world. He ends completely alienated—therefore, neither African nor French. In *The River Between* (1965) Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o has found a perfect metaphor to suggest the split that faced Africans on the point of independence, when they had to find ways to negotiate between the old ways and those of the colonizer. In Ngugi's case, the story chooses the practice of female circumcision to represent cultural purity to many Africans, and torture of women to Europeans—and, of course, a practice condemned by Christianity.

Forty years have passed since the publication of those early novels. A new generation of novelists now incorporates Christianity into its writing with less of an edge. Prominent among them is Chimamanda Ngozi Adi-

chie, who unabashedly identifies as a Roman Catholic. This is a feature of her writing, but does not dominate her novels; it is not, as it was in the earlier generation's novels, a thematic target. Instead, and now that Christianity has become a very vibrant and Africanized presence in many postcolonies (and in some cases has served as a force for reconciliation, as in South Africa, or for greater human respect through the incorporation of liberation theology) Christianity is merely one feature of characters' personalities. In *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) Adichie tells the story of a teen-aged girl raised in a strict Roman Catholic family, with a father who converted in order to get a good education. He becomes a true believer, but the religion fuels his psychological need for perfection in himself and those around him. His daughter places second in her class of twenty-five, and he sees this as a failure. He despises the native religion that he left behind. But Catholicism is not Adichie's target. In fact, when the protagonist spends time at her less-uptight aunt's home, she encounters a refreshing Catholicism that is very much a product of Vatican II, ecumenical and creative. This provides the strength needed in the later chapters, when her family (and the nation) fall apart.

Similarly appreciative treatments of Christianity as something other than villainous hypocrisy are found in novels like Chris Abani's *Grace-land* (2004) and Uwem Akpan's *Say You're One of Them* (2008), where the teachings of the religion, more than the institution itself, imbue the themes. Abani is a former Jesuit; Akpan a current one. This suggests the maturing of the Christian church in Africa, and explains the popularity of a Cameroonian theologian like Jean-Marc Éla, who writes that

The experience of faith is marked by tensions and discords that are born in black Africa from the encounter of the church with ancestral culture. In African villages or slums, a relationship with the invisible is part of the experience of faith of Christians. This obsession or fascination with the occult must not be ignored by the churches. . . . Africans search for happiness in the shadow of their ancestors. We must join them there. (166-68)

"We" and "them" is an interesting choice of words, and whether or not it consciously sets its author apart from the people from which he arose, Éla works at cross-purposes here: he is clearly speaking to a non-European audience, and wishes to bring them aboard and have them see a mature Africanized Church that they need to accept as equals. On the other hand, any African reading his book might flinch at this reminder of what is still arguably lost when Rome is embraced. More accurately, though, this would seem to be a class issue, rather than national or racial: the people of the slums and villages on one side, and the sophisticated Africans with a European education on the other.

It cannot be said, therefore, that there is a melding of Christianity and traditional African religion in these contemporary novelists, let alone a

common symbology that such authors mutually employ these days. But what can be seen is a higher degree of comfort with the increasingly Africanized version of Christianity in which they themselves were raised, and in which they locate the characters in their novels. That Africanized Christianity, whether in the traditional churches of Catholicism and Protestantism or in the AICs, continues to test the waters, drawing on indigenous religious traditions to invigorate not only Africans but—as recent movements in the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches have seen—the west, as well.

ISLAM

Around the year 800 Islam had established major commercial cities in what is now Mozambique. In 1000 Islam established itself in southern Africa, in 1054 it captured the kingdom of Ghana, and in 1087 the kingdom of Kanem-Bornu in what is now Chad, Libya and eastern Niger converted to Islam. In 1529 the Muslim state of Adal in today's southwestern Somalia conquered most of Christian Ethiopia, but in 1541 the Ethiopians regained their territory. "The Islamisation of north Africa," writes Mazrui, "took place primarily through political means (conquest, control, and suzerainty) but on the other hand, Islamisation in Black Africa has tended to occur primarily through economic means (trade and economic migration)" (136). If Islam has been a dominant religious force in northern Africa and in much of west Africa for centuries, it has in recent years met with rising criticism from novelists, and particularly from women such as Nawal el Saadawi, who principally attacks the patriarchal overlay in its interpretation in Arabic countries (see Woodhull).¹² Islam meets with a most interesting and provocative treatment, arguably very pro-Islamist, in Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam* (1985; see Hawley 2001), but fares less favorably in Driss Chraïbi's early novels (Hawley 1996) and in such classics as Chaikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1972; see Bangura) and Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1969). Both of the latter deal with the disastrous impact of a sojourn to Europe on its African protagonist's identity as a believing Muslim—and both characters end badly. Thus, the critique there is not against Islam or Islam's adherents particularly (though teachers in the elementary school in Kane's novel are portrayed as very cruel), but against the "clash of civilizations," if we may use that term, and the resulting dilemma that it presents to those raised as believers. As in so many African novels that deal with religion, the perceived incompatibility between local customs and the newer ways seems to be the true subject. But in African novels dealing with Islam, Islam itself is generally portrayed as the older tradition, and it is this that comes into conflict with European secularism. (In similar novels dealing with Christianity, the

"older" tradition that seems threatened is indigenous religion.) Ousmane Sembène's novels and films, though, generally portray Islam as a materialistic foreign occupation of Africa.

The attack on a patriarchy seen as endemic to Islam is criticized, as noted above, in el Saadawi's novels, and also in those of Nuruddin Farah (for example, in *Sardines*, 1981) and in Mariama Bâ's (for example, in *So Long a Letter*, 1980). While noting that "in the very essence of Islam, as such, the status of women is no worse than it is in Judaism or in Christianity" (1980, 5), el Saadawi argues that writing about women in Arab society, especially by female authors, is sensitive:

Almost every step might touch an electrified wire, a sanctified and sacred spot which is meant to be untouchable, a value that is not to be questioned because it is a part of the religious and moral structures that rear themselves up like heavy iron bars whenever questions related to women are raised and hands stretched out to set her free. Religion, in particular, is a weapon often used in traditionalist societies to cut short, or even cut down, the efforts of researchers, and seekers after truth. I have come to see more and more clearly that religion is most often used in our day as an instrument in the hands of economic and political forces, as an institution utilized by those who rule to keep down those who are ruled. In this it serves the same purpose as juridical, educational, police and even psychiatric systems used to perpetuate the patriarchal family, historically born, reinforced, and maintained by the oppression of women, children and slaves. (3-4)¹³

By way of contrast with Christianity, one might note that, in Paul Gunda-ni's words, "there is 'theoretical' realization that women dominate the [Christian and AIC] churches in Africa, [but] Christian historiography has not as yet changed to reflect this fact" (245). That is, women in African Christian churches are following the pattern of women in Christian churches in the rest of the world, and are taking leadership roles even when they are officially denied to them. But this is not the case with Islam in Africa.

Woman plays a dangerous role in *Season of Migration to the North*, viewed from the Islamic man's point of view; this is certainly ironic, since she is killed by the man. From his viewpoint, though, (and proving el Saadawi's point, perhaps), she is a temptress: "I no longer saw or was conscious of anything but this catastrophe, in the shape of a woman, that fate had decreed for me. She was my destiny and in her lay my destruction, yet for me the whole world was not worth a mustard seed in comparison" (Salih 160). Significantly, though, the man is Sudanese, and the woman a Londoner: "I was the invader who had come from the South, and this was the icy battlefield from which I would not make a safe return" (160). The novel is celebrated as a postcolonial treat in which a fairly psychopathic African plays on the erotic prejudices that are projected onto him (or so he thinks) by the white British women upon whom

he preys. But, ultimately, he himself is destroyed in the exchange, losing his soul on many levels: "Turning to left and right, I found I was half way between north and south. I was unable to continue, unable to return" (167).

This is much the same fate that befalls the protagonist in Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*, where a Senegalese young man is sent to Paris for an education that, it is hoped, can later be turned against the colonizer. But he is destroyed in the process. It is not that he is totally won over by western secularism: he definitely sees the benefits of the truths derived through rationalism, but he also clings to a desire for a universal Truth that he concludes is missing in France (Kane 76). He encounters there, and is caught by, ambiguity; he is ensnared by complexity that overcomes his earlier simplistic religion. Indeed, when his confusion and philosophical paralysis is discovered upon his return to Senegal, he is assassinated by a true believer. Such a fate in a classic African novel embodies the dilemma that John Mbiti describes: "with a few exceptions, Islam. . . has not fully awoken to the demands of the day. Its legalism and slowness to be bent by modern man are almost certainly going to deposit it in the unenviable position of stagnation and irrelevance, unless it changes radically and rapidly" (358). But one wonders whose notion of irrelevance this turns out to be, begging the questions: relevant to whom, and for what?

"Liberated" women, and liberated men, for that matter, are generally denigrated in the Islam that is portrayed in African novels, as representative of a movement away from the traditions that maintain a fundamentalist reading of the Qu'ran—regardless of the social position that women may play in traditional African societies. The novelists themselves, who may or may not be practicing Muslims themselves, are therefore running counter to millions of Muslims in Africa who seem content with a patriarchal and enclosed society. It remains to be seen where these social distinctions evident in Christianity and Islam may lead the nations where they both exist, and where they compete for the hearts and minds of Africans with an enduring interest in traditional indigenous religions.

As Mazrui notes, "all over Africa the processes of both synthesis and dissonance continue. Three visions of God seek to capture the soul of a continent" (157). Put another way, John Mbiti wrote some time ago that "African peoples experience modern changes as a religious phenomenon, and respond to it in search of a stability which is fundamentally colored by a religious yearning or outlook" (344).¹⁴ But how long will such an outlook imbue the lives of contemporary Africans as they engage ever-increasingly with the secular west? If postcolonial theorists can suggest that the empire is writing back to the colonizers and redefining both sides of that equation, perhaps it remains to be seen, as well, whether or not the African sense of spirituality may have a similarly transforming effect in the lives of black Americans and Europeans who learn more about their

heritage and its modern manifestations. But that may be too much to hope for. The most forceful writing coming out of contemporary Africa, not surprisingly, focuses on horrific suffering—the child soldiers in Uzo-dinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*, the intra-tribal genocide of Uwem Akpan's *Say You're One of Them*, the anguish of dictatorship and corruption of Moses Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles*, the stark amorality of K. Sello Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*. By contrast, the fantastic animism of Ben Okri's *Famished Road*, as powerfully imaginative as any world envisioned in the last twenty years, remains an artifice, an entertainment for sophisticates in the capitals of the west and, perhaps, of Africa. One suspects the stark realities of life that the vast majority of people in the struggling countries of Africa suffer leave little room for such lofty entertainments, and religion draws whatever power it may offer its followers from the quiet faith and endurance that gets these people, some of them, through the day. As noted in this essay's opening paragraph, "African peoples today, especially the elders, look at their classical religious heritage with a nostalgia for a paradise lost" (Olupona xv).

NOTES

1. His book demonstrates "the revolutionary power of vodou, the prestige of African precedent in candomblé, the multiple levels of meaning in santería, the deliverance from evil in Revival Zion, and the freedom eschatology of the Black Church" (Murphy 176). For an examination of religions "found not among contemporary Africans, but among the descendants of sub-Saharan Africans dispersed throughout the Americas during the Atlantic slave trade" (Simpson 1), see Simpson. For a discussion of contemporary African theological influences in America, particularly on novelists and poets, see Hopkins 78-80, 97-98, 148, 178, 190-97. For a discussion of ways in which "religious ideas, practices, and institutions interact with processes of economic, political, and cultural globalization," including "de- and reterritorialization, transnational religious networks, globalization, hybridity, and borders and borderlands," see Vázquez and Marquardt.

2. "A similar domesticating process affected African religions that were transplanted to the New World . . . [where] slaves adapted their masters' religion but still kept on praying to their African deities and dancing to their music in the new land" (Olupona xv).

3. Born in Nigeria, Okri was brought to London at the age of a year and a half. While there he lived, "in spiritual terms," he says, "on three levels. School and its [Christian] religious education. My parents' [African] traditional and religious beliefs. And then there was the world of my childhood, my reading and thinking." He describes his spirituality as eclectic and having to do with "travelling between cultures" (Mooney).

4. His later novels "are packed with Yoruba deities, towns, customs, superstitions, and proverbs. Tutuola, despite his reading and increased sophistication, apparently chose to remain a teller of Yoruba tales" (643). As Lindfors further notes, Tutuola's heroes are "a composite of the most popular folktale protagonists—hunter, magician, trickster, superman, culture hero—and some of the adventures he relates closely resemble episodes in well-known Yoruba yarns (e.g., a half-bodied ghost. . .). Moreover, certain motifs such as the facile shifting of bodily shapes, the contests between rival

magicians, and the encounters with monsters, mutants and multiform ghosts clearly derive from oral tradition. . . . [T]he quarrel between heaven and earth, the carrying of a sacrifice to heaven, the tiny creature that makes newly-cleared field sprout weeds, the *enfant terrible*, the magical transformations—can be documented as traditional among the Yoruba" (635, 639).

5. And see Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964) and A. S. Mopeli-Paulus's *Turn to the Dark* (1956).

6. For a somewhat countervailing critique, see Chinweizu.

7. Jan Gorak describes his play, *The Hill*, as "an uncompromising attack on Christian mythology," and calls Mda anticlerical (483).

8. In some cases Africans were not encouraged to recount or revise folktales, or invent secular tales of their own. George Lang writes that "the following principles were generally applied wherever missionaries served as a major instrument of colonial education, as in Ghana: distortion of indigenous reality to fit the narrative and ideological patterns of biblical and other Christian formulaic tales; the use of translated hymns, psalms and creeds in religious services which, despite Puritanism, could not help containing elements of literary art and exercising some aesthetic attraction; the composition of pedagogical and polemic texts, all other being excluded because they were too frivolous, if not immoral, or were simply beyond the capabilities of the missionary personnel and their pupils" (110).

9. See "African Christianity: A History of the Christian Church in Africa." Available at: <http://www.bethel.edu/~letnie/AfricanChristianity/WNAAugustine.html>. Accessed September 23, 2008. Also, "The Christian Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt." Available at: <http://www.coptic.net/EncyclopediaCoptica/>. Accessed September 23, 2008.

10. AICs, African Initiated (or Independent, or Indigenous) Churches, of course, go beyond assimilation, and shunt Jesus Christ to a position that would be heretical to Christians.

11. And see V. Y. Mudimbe's *Between Tides* (1973), in which a Zairean becomes a Catholic priest, then deserts that vocation to become a Marxist, and concludes that both were oppressive systems.

12. In discussing the writing of *The Fall of the Imam* (1988) and her creation of the figure from which the book draws its name, el Saadawi writes: "I could not allow [the Imam] to exercise absolute power in my story, just as he had done in everything else. I said to myself, at least where my novel is concerned I should enjoy some freedom, exercise some control over the Imam, and not let him do just as he likes" (iv).

13. See, also, Zayzafoon.

14. And see Appiah, "Old Gods, New Worlds," 107-36.

WORKS CITED

- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Purple Hibiscus*. New York: Anchor Random House, 2003.
- Aire, Victor O. "Ousmane Sembène's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu*: A Lesson in Consciousness." *Modern Language Studies* 8.2 (1978): 72-79.
- Akpan, Uwem. *Say You're One of Them*. New York: Little Brown and Company, 2008.
- Ani, Marimba. *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994.
- Appiah, Kwame Appiah. *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Bangura, Ahmed. *Islam and the West African Novel: The Politics of Representation*. (Hardcover). Boulder, CO: L. Rienner, 2000.
- Beti, Mongo. *The Poor Christ of Bomba*. Trans. Gerald Moore. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1971.
- . *Mission to Kala*. London and Ibadan, Nigeria: 1958.

- Chidester, David. *Religions of South Africa*. London and New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Chinweizu, Jemie Onwuchekwa, and Ihechukwu Madubuike. *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature, Vol. 1, African Fiction and Poetry and Their Critics*. Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publishing, 1980.
- el Saadawi, Nawal. *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*. London: Zed, 1980.
- . *God Dies by the Nile*, 2nd ed. London: Zed, 2007.
- . *The Fall of the Imam*. London: Saqi, 2001.
- Éla, Jean-Marc. *My Faith as an African*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988.
- Gorak, Jan. "Nothing to Root For: Zakes Mda and South African Resistance Theatre." *Theatre Journal* 41.4 (1989): 478-91.
- Gundani, Paul. "Rev. of *African Christianity, Its Public Role*, by Paul Gifford." *Zambezia* (1998), 25.2: 243-46.
- Hawley, John. "Levels of National Engagement in Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam*." *Mapping the Sacred: Religion, Geography and Postcolonial Literatures*, ed. Jamie S. Scott. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001. 265-74.
- . "The Re-Racination of Driss Chraïbi: A Hajj in Search of Mecca." *Aspects of Islam in African Literature*. Ed. Kenneth Harrow. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996. 62-76.
- . "Ben Okri's Spirit-Child: Abiku Migration and Postmodernity." *Research in African Literatures* (1995) 26.1: 30-39.
- . "Mongo Beti and Jean-Marc Éla: Literary and Christian Liberation in Cameroon." *The Literary Griot: International Journal of Black Oral and Literary Studies* (1994) 6.2:14-23.
- Hopkins, Dwight N. *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993.
- Kane, Cheikh Hamidou. *Ambiguous Adventure*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1963.
- Konadu, Asare. *Ordained by the Oracle*. London: Heinemann, 1969.
- Lang, George. "Creative Writing in English: Emergence and Stagnation: Ghana and Nigeria." In: *European-Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Albert S. Gérard. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1986. Vol. II: 632-49. Vol. I: 108-115.
- Lindfors, Bernth. "Amos Tutuola: Literary Syncretism and the Yoruba Folk Tradition." In: *European-Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Albert S. Gérard. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1986. Vol. II: 632-49.
- Mazrui, Ali A. *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1989.
- Lorentzon, Lief. "Let the House be Dead Silent: A Discussion of Literariness in East African Oral Culture." *Literary History: Towards a Global Perspective*. Vol 1. *Notions of Literature Across Times and Cultures*, ed. Anders Patterson. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. 2006: 206-244.
- Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Doubleday, 1970.
- Mda, Zakes. *Ways of Dying*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995.
- . *She Plays with the Darkness*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995.
- . *The Madonna of Excelsior*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.
- . *The Heart of Redness*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.
- Mooney, Bel. "Mixing It." *New Internationalist* (2004) 370. Web.
- Mudimbe, V. Y. *Between the Tides*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991 [1973, Paris: Presence Africaine]
- Munonye, John. *Obi*. London: Heinemann, 1969.
- Murphy, Joseph. *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.
- Neba, Divine Che. "Deconstruction and reconstruction of English in postcolonial writings: A gateway to multiculturalism." *Internet-Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften* 16.3.2: Postcolonial innovations and transformations: Putting language in the forefront (March 2006): Web.

- Ngugi, wa Thiong'o. *The River Between*. Ibadan, Nigeria, and London: Heinemann, 1965.
- Okara, Gabriel. *The Voice*. New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1970.
- Okri, Ben. *The Famished Road*. New York: Nan A. Talese and Doubleday, 1991.
- Olakunle, George. "The 'Native' Missionary, the African Novel, and In-Between." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* (2002): Web.
- Olupona, Jacob K., ed. *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings, and Expressions*. New York: Crossroad, 2000.
- Sacks, Karen. "Women and Class Struggle in Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood*." *Signs* 4.2 (1978): 363-70.
- Salih, Tayeb. *Season of Migration to the North*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1991.
- Sembène, Ousmane. *God's Bits of Wood*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Doubleday, 1960.
- Soyinka, Wole. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
- Tutuola, Amos. *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. New York: Grove, 1954.
- Vásquez, Manuel A. and Marie Friedmann Marquandt. *Globalizing the Sacred: Religion Across the Americas*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003.
- Woodhull, Winifred. *Transfigurations of the Maghreb: Feminism, Decolonization, and Literatures*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Zayzafoon, Lamia Ben Youssef. *The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History, and Ideology*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2005.