

Subversive Writing and Anticolonial Literature

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Abstract :

*This article reassesses the enduring role of oral literature in African societies and shows how its integration into postcolonial writing becomes an act of resistance, identity reconstruction, and revalorization of Indigenous knowledge systems. Through a comparative analysis of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross*, it highlights the ways in which these authors draw on tales, proverbs, songs, and other oral forms to reveal the richness, coherence, and historical depth of precolonial African societies, while deconstructing colonial representations that long portrayed them as ahistorical or disorganized.*

The study thus demonstrates that orality, far from being merely a cultural heritage, becomes in Achebe and Ngugi's works a truly aesthetic and political instrument : a means of challenging colonial domination, overturning imposed stereotypes, and reaffirming the legitimacy of African knowledge systems. It examines in particular how this literary reclaiming contributes to re-educating populations about their history and heritage, counterbalancing centuries of ideological distortion.

*Finally, this article will try to show how the reintegration of oral traditions in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross* function simultaneously as an aesthetic strategy, a political act of decolonization, and an epistemological reclaiming of African knowledge systems in postcolonial literature.*

Key words : *colonial narrative, misrepresentation, collective memory, African identity, aesthetic*

Résumé :

Cet article réévalue le rôle durable de la littérature orale dans les sociétés africaines et montre comment son intégration dans l'écriture postcoloniale devient un acte de résistance, de reconstruction identitaire et de

revalorisation des savoirs autochtones. À travers une analyse comparée de *Things Fall Apart* de Chinua Achebe et *Devil on the Cross* de Ngugi wa Thiong'o, il met en lumière la manière dont ces auteurs mobilisent contes, proverbes, chants et autres formes orales pour révéler la richesse, la cohérence et la profondeur historique des sociétés africaines précoloniales, tout en déconstruisant les représentations coloniales qui les ont longtemps décrites comme ahistoriques ou désorganisées.

L'étude montre ainsi que l'oralité, loin d'être un simple héritage culturel, devient chez Achebe et Ngugi un véritable instrument esthétique et politique : un moyen de contester la domination coloniale, de renverser les stéréotypes imposés, mais aussi de réaffirmer la légitimité des systèmes de connaissance africains. Elle examine en particulier la manière dont cette réappropriation littéraire contribue à rééduquer les populations sur leur histoire et leur patrimoine, contrebalançant des siècles de déformation idéologique.

Finalement, cet article va essayer de démontrer dans quelle mesure l'intégration de la tradition orale dans *Things Fall Apart* et *Devil on the Cross* constitue-t-elle un acte esthétique, politique et épistémologique, permettant à Achebe et Ngugi de déconstruire le discours colonial tout en légitimant la littérature africaine comme lieu de production autonome de savoirs.

Mots clés : récit colonial, mémoire collective, mauvaise représentation, identité africaine, esthétique

Introduction

The advent of colonialism in Africa marked a profound rupture in the cultural, political, and social fabric of the continent. Far from the myth of a “civilizing mission,” the arrival of European powers disrupted well-established systems of governance, belief, and community that had long defined African societies. Writers such as Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o have stood at the forefront of literary resistance to this historical misrepresentation, using fiction as a means to reclaim African voices and histories. Through their works, they expose the cultural erasure imposed by colonial powers and highlight the enduring strength of African traditions. This paper aims to examine how *Things Fall Apart* by Achebe and *Devil on the Cross* by Ngugi serve not only as critiques of colonial and

postcolonial domination, but also as acts of cultural preservation and political resistance. In comparing these two seminal works—set in different regions yet driven by a common purpose—we gain a deeper understanding of the strategies employed by African writers to restore a silenced heritage and assert the legitimacy of indigenous knowledge systems in the face of imperial conquest.

To understand African literature in its full depth, one must begin with its roots—not in ink, but in the spoken word. Oral literature, far from being a secondary or primitive form, represents the original and most authentic expression of cultural memory across civilizations. In Africa, as in many parts of the world, stories, cultural practices, and traditions were told before they were written. Songs, proverbs, folktales, and epic narratives were vital tools through which values were taught, histories preserved, and communities united. This form of literature was not just Entertainment ; it was education, resistance, morality, and celebration. Oral literature carried the weight of philosophy, cosmology, and social regulation long before the written word became dominant.

While Western traditions have also relied on oral forms, African oral literature has often been marginalized or dismissed due to colonial biases that equated literacy with civilization. Yet, as both African and Western scholars—such as Professor Mamadou Kandji—have shown, oral traditions are the bedrock of all literature. This study seeks to explore not only the value and function of African oral literature but also its transition into written form during colonial time as a tool of cultural assertion, protest, and education. By examining how African authors like Achebe and Ngugi rooted their narratives in oral traditions, we gain insight into how literature functions as a dynamic, living force in African societies before, during, and after colonization.

In doing so, we reclaim the centrality of African voices in the global literary tradition.

I. Introducing Colonial Narrative on Africa

Some writers like Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o have shown through their writings that when the imperialists arrived in Africa for the first time, they found order, coherence, and harmony according to an African understanding of the world. They also found political, economic, and social organizational systems. The Africans have already had their own cultural practices and identity based on strong religious principles and traditional values. All these realities existed in a way proper to African societies and people. These traditions were sustained by social practices whose framework was the respect of elders, of kinship, of community rules and mutual help and understanding. There were wars, and periods of instability and peace between different communities as the societies were in perpetual change. In this context, Africans resembled any other society in the world. Justice was settled according to principles that suited their traditions. Therefore, people tried to make peace prevail by abiding by the laws of their society. There were times of disturbances too. And this is as true as democracy is nothing but a set of principles, as long as these rules suit their realities and as long as they bring peace, abundance and prosperity, and that they can perpetuate a community's traditions.

But with the contact with the white man, there were clashes of cultures between the two civilizations and the African system collapsed under the power of hostile forces. The imperialists came with their culture, system of government, religious beliefs which they implemented by force, crushing any type of resistance. African culture and western one could not mingle together because of the differences in beliefs, of historical background, and of the environments they belong to. These

differences make it that Africans and westerners have different solutions to their problems. Therefore, there surely was a clash of cultures as Franz Fanon stated it :

Colonialization because it is total and tends to oversimplify, very soon manages in spectacular fashion to obliterate the cultural life of the conquered people. This cultural obliteration to disrupt traditions is made possible by the negation of national reality by new legal relations introduced by the occupying power, by the bannishment of the native and their customs to outlying districts by colonial society, expropriation, and by the systematic enslavement of men and women.¹

According to this statement, the colonialists completely denied any existence of the African culture when they arrived. The aim was to destroy all aspects of African culture in order to set the basis of their long-lasting domination. They declared African cultural practices as uncivilized, then fought them and replaced them with new practices and laws and rules that encouraged division and conflicts among natives and that set the cornerstones of imperialism. From then on, westerners deprived Africans people of their freedom, their happiness, and of their lands in their expansionist quest and gradually conquered, oppressed and exploited them. Despising the Africans, and denying them their identity, the colonizers claimed the inexistence of an African civilization or pretentiously declared the indigenous culture as barbarous and uncivilized. They

¹ Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1965, New York, p. 158

submitted natives to centuries of domination. These practices set the basis of colonial domination.

I. Setting the Basis of Colonial Domination

The colonial authorities declared they had a divine mission to pacify and to civilize what they considered unsettled communities whose people were considered having sub-cultures. To back their strategies, they built schools and churches. Countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Portugal, Belgium and Germany used brutal force and vicious machination to subjugate African people and plunder their resources. They taught curricula that formed and alienated elite mainly constituted by a servile bourgeois class under the yoke of colonial rulers. Their education encouraged falseness and deceit and installed psychological inferiority in the African mind. Their teaching and domination based on their languages implied that language is closely related to political power, social, cultural and economic change and domination. The imperialists created division among different communities and members of the same communities, weakening local social, economic political and religious systems. Consequently, whether willingly or by force, many Africans were converted, schooled, trained and they were used to serve the colonial power and interests and administration. As a result, some natives were so zealous as to despise their own people and reject their own culture. They left their own values or committed sacrileges against their own religious sanctuaries. However, some others refused subjugation, protested against colonial rules and domination, and fought against imperial ruling. They stood firm against overwhelming odds and sought to preserve their dignity and the African personality. They appeared as Africa's receptacles and defenders.

II. Pioneers of African Subversive Writing

The choice of Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o is motivated by the fact that they are pioneers of Africa's subversive writing against colonial rules. Comparing their novels, namely *Things Fall Apart* for Achebe and *Devil on the Cross* for wa Thiong'o will give a global overview of interesting elements African oral literature that not only exposed colonial oppression and destruction of local systems but also that attempted to oppose domination. The choice of Ngugi from East Africa and Achebe from the West provides a methodology that spans the utter destruction of African political systems by the same imperial powers that used the same strategies and motifs everywhere. But they also show that Africans, too, used the same oral traditions in different contexts to oppose colonialism and cultural oppression. Achebe and Ngugi tried to demonstrate that after destroying the African social, economic, political and religious structures, the colonial powers established what can be described as a cultural chaos and created a class society ruled by western methods on the detriment of African people. They also shared the vision that after independence, disappointed African masses lived an era of political disillusionment in postcolonial Africa. The two authors used subversive methods to castigate colonial discourses and to show that Africa, too, has its values and political organization and religious system that deserve respect and consideration.

Chinua Achebe was born in November 16th 1930 in Ogidi, some miles to the North-East of Onitsha, Nigeria, West Africa. He is the son of missionary teachers Okofu and Janet Achebe. His father worked at the church, teaching at the mission on Wednesdays and he was in charge of the village church at the same time. Achebe attended his father's mission school with the other children and was raised as a Christian. From there, he got admission to Government College in Umuafia in 1944. He

entered University College in Ibadan in 1948 where he learned English, history, and religious studies. He got a B. A. degree in literary studies in 1953.² *Things Fall Apart* is a novel that was published in 1958 nearly at the end of the colonial era. The novel mainly deals with the clash of European and African cultures, and the violent transition in life and values brought about by the onset of British colonization in Nigeria and particularly in Igbo territory at the end of the nineteenth century. Achebe uses elements of African oral traditions to oppose the missionaries' settlement and their attempt to implement their civilization not without destabilizing the local culture.³ This cultural confrontation will have profound consequences in the life of indigenous people in Nigeria.

As far as Ngugi wa Thiong'o is concerned, he was born in Kimiriithu, in Kenya, East Africa, in 1938, under British rule. Ngugi's family belonged to Kenya's largest ethnic group, the Kikuyu. His father, Thiong'o wa Nduku, was a peasant farmer who was forced to become a squatter after the British Imperial Act of 1915. Ngugi was born in this tumultuous period of confrontation between autochtones and European settlers. Ngugi attended the missionary school in Kamaandura in Limuru, then Karinga School in Maanguu, before going to Alliance High School in Kikuyu. He was raised as a devout Christian, who however learned about Kikuyu values and history at school and who underwent the kikuyu rite of passage ceremony. Later, in 1976, Ngugi would reject his Christian name and change it from James Ngugi, which he saw as a sign of colonialism to Ngugi wa Thiong'o, to honor his kikuyu heritage. After receiving his B. A. in English from Makerere University in Uganda in 1963, Ngugi worked briefly as a journalist in Nairobi.⁴ *Devil on the*

² Mamadou Diang Diallo, orality and Anticolonialism : A Comparative Study of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross*, 2008/2009, p. 5, Master's Thesis : Unpublished.

³ Mamadou Diang Diallo, *ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴ Mamadou D. Diallo, *ibid.* p. 5.

Cross was first written on toilet papers while Ngugi was serving a prison term without trial. The novel was first published in Gikuyu by Heinemann Educational Books publisher in 1980. It was then translated in English by Ngugi himself. The book mainly castigates the exploitation of masses by foreigners and neocolonial African leaders. In fact, African colonial elite participated in the domination of their own people by collaborating with the colonial rulers. For example, among the disruption that occurred during colonial settlement, we have the disturbance that interrupted the normal course of religious events and the desacralization of those events. Local leaders sometimes played the role of facilitators in that process. The book is also a revival of African values as the author uses a lot of oral traditions to show that African people have their own ways of telling their history. The main theme is political disillusionment but Ngugi's reference to African proverbs, tales, stories, and songs, is a strong commitment to oppose colonial discourse and new African leaders' collaboration to perpetuate the White man's domination.

In this comparative analysis of the two novels, Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o are committed to upgrade, rehabilitate, and restore Africa's lost consciousness and cultural patrimony in two different narrative techniques but with the same purpose that is to debunk colonial narrative.

III. Historical Background of African Literature

One cannot talk about African literature without mentioning oral literature. In every civilization, literature was first said before being written. In fact, even in western civilization, traditions have been kept in societies through oral transmission in ballads, songs, lullabies, tales, epics and so on, and this has always been the case long before the invention of printing. The interest given to British traditions by Professor Mamadou Kandji, who

dedicated a special work entitled *Roman anglais et traditions populaires*⁵, confirms it. The great number of authors quoted by Pr. Kandji, and who devoted a lot of literary works on English popular traditions show that oral traditions have always been given a paramount importance in world literature, and are not exclusive to Africa. Between the 18th and 19th centuries, authors like Thomas Hardy, Walter Scott, Georges Eliot, Charles Dickens, and Emily and Charlotte Brontë, greatly marked their literary productions with ethno-texts, each enriching their texts with local oral traditions. Kandji says : “*The romantic symbols are almost all drawn from the local nature, its sound aspects, its customs and its folklore. The fictional characters belong, with a few exceptions, to the region.*”⁶ Literature whether written or oral has a universal character because it existed in the oldest civilizations. Kandji added : *A brief overview of the history of the marvellous shows that it is a very old theme that has found its place in literature. It is present among the Greek fabulists where it is synonymous with fantasy.*⁷ So it wouldn't be wrong to say that any literature that respect itself has an oral face. And this importance given to oral literature had even been defended long ago by great writers like Charles Dickens :

As early as 1853, in a series of articles published in Household Words, the novelist Charles Dickens urged writers and literary critics to give more space to fairy tales and fantasy. At the same time, he maintained that a nation without imagination never has and will never

⁵ Mamadou Kandji, *Roman anglais et traditions populaires*, 1997, Humanitas, p. 11.

⁶ Mamadou Kandji, *ibid.* p. 8. (My translation).

⁷ Mamadou Kandji, *ibid.* p. 8. (My translation).

be able to carve out a respectable
place for itself in the sun.⁸

However, literature, whether oral or written, has different functions related to various contexts. In the following section, we will try to define literature, then give some of its functions.

IV. Definiton and Functions of Literature

Literature beyond being a simple word must be taken as a concept that has been misunderstood or misinterpreted by many people and Western schools of thoughts for a long time, and sometimes, this is done on purpose. The difficulty in giving a true and generally acceptable definition of literature is broadly related to the fact that the relationship between the writer and the audience, or the storyteller and the audience must be put into context. This simple fact implies that literture accepts as many interpretatitons and definitions as there are different kinds of storytellings and audiences depending on which culture someone is expressing a people's culture or telling a particular story.

The fact that literature is generally understood as only an author's written creativity is a partial and incomplete definition whcih is destined to discredit other ways of telling a story, mainly oral literature. The latter must be considered by taking into account the history, context, and living conditions of the African communities, and their ways of expressing their cultures. Literature taken as written documents only cannot be accepted as a complete and sufficient definition because this perspective excludes a continent like Africa where written forms of history accounts or literature is scarce or is perceptible generally with the advent of foreign presence : Arabic and Islamic documents first, Western and Christian later. It means

⁸ Mamadou Kandji, *ibid.* p. 8-9. (My translation).

that Africa has its own way of keeping its history alive and this way is mainly through oral literature.

The oral form which has existed alongside the oldest form of social and political organization in Africa is as old as the communities. To understand literature as a people's cultural expression, one has to look for its various functions in society.

In fact, literature can take many forms as well as, any functions depending on which purpose it is used. As far as these functions are concerned, one can name the didactic function, the function of protest, the moralization function, the information function, the corrective function, the function of glorification and that of the voice of the people. We will talk about these functions of literature in society before dealing with the way Africans used literature before the colonial era.

4.1. The Didactic function of literature

Literature as a means of teaching might seem the most fundamental and most important function. As it has already been known and related by many sources, colonial Western writers were interested in educating their readership only about what they knew or claimed to know or wanted them to know about Africa and the African people. Truly speaking, following the reactions of African authors whenever possible, it has been demonstrated that this knowledge was most of the time non-existent, it was assumed or deliberately created. In fact, where the western writer or investigator of the colonial era had no knowledge at all about African culture, he deliberately twisted or fabricated one. And that was done on purpose because they had a political and economic agenda on Africa. Besides, they had an audience whose curiosity they wanted to satisfy. Some of them, did not even bother themselves to visit the continent they claimed to know so much about. They just borrowed from others and extended the myths already created. All these behaviors

were meant to gear the education of their own people towards justifying the so-called civilizing mission they prepared on Africa and African citizens. For this reason, the African, the European was describing to his audience, was always portrayed as a subhuman or worse a substitute to a local animal such a hyena, a monkey if he is not a sorcerer, a man-eating cannibal, a man without faith, or some other sorts of evil.

Conversely, the didactic function was used by Africans to initiate their youth through rites of passage ceremonies. That was done through marking rites, dances, songs, tales, riddles, hunting parties, wrestling, and many other moral and physical activities to perpetuate their cultural traditions and day to day practices for economic, social, political and historical reasons. In addition, we can cite novels and poetry of African authors who brought a counter-narrative perspective to colonial literature in order to correct damaging images left by a long history of denigration. The first group of colonial and post-colonial African writers set themselves the mission of revalorizing Africa aesthetics and beauty, a mission of re-educating the world about the actual cultural richness, about the images of Africa as portrayed by African people. They did it not because Africa was a perfect land but because it is a land lived by humans with their positive sides and their flaws like every other human beings across the world. As such, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Cyprien Ekwensi's *Burning Grass*, Gabriel Okara's *The Fisherman's Invocation*, Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, Ngugi's *The River Between*, etc., were not so much a condemnation of European journey's in Africa but more an enumeration of Africa's rich cultural values and heritage, an attempt to inform the whole world that Africa had actually existed and possessed her own literature long before the coming of the White man. Didactically, therefore, literature, whether oral or written, serves to educate a specific audience to whom it has been destined.

4.2. Literature as a vehicle of Moralization

For a long time and particularly in the middle age, literature has served as a means of moral instruction to teach people the rights and wrongs of their contemporary society. This function focuses on what must or must not be done by people living in society. Jean de la Fontaine imitating Aesop, did not just write his fables for want of other idleness. In his famous fable, *The Fox and the Crow*, for example, the fox makes the crow look stupid at the end and he advises him that every flatterer lives at the expense of whoever listens to him. The fox represents people who are always seeking for ways to cheat others around him. He too invariably suffers defeat at the end and the listener very easily imbibes the moral lesson meaning that cheating people does not always pay.⁹ In one of Aesop's fables- *The frog and the Ox*, the Father Frog burst himself to death pretending to be as big as the Ox in order to impress his son. This is another lesson to warn people that “ *Self-conceit may lead to self-destruction.*”¹⁰ There abound many other stories that are to guide our moral conduct in society. In Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, the heroine is portrayed as a model citizen despite her childlessness. This is to teach people that there is virtue in tolerance, self-acceptance and contentment with what we have. The moral function of literature transcends national, international and inter-racial barriers as plays, fables, and folktales have equally existed ever since in all parts of the world as long as people care to remember.

4.3. Literature as a Protest Instrument

For readers of authors such as Ferdinand Oyono, Chinua Achebe, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, to name but a few, the term literature of protest is certainly not new to them. A striking example of such literature is Ngugi's *Mau Mau* guerilla songs and his committed theater staging peasants and workers complaining about their harsh and inhuman working conditions

⁹ <https://www.la-fontaine-ch-cherry.net>

¹⁰ Aesop's fables, <https://www.freekidsbooks.org>

and their disillusionment in neocolonial Kenya. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe also portrayed the new types of crooked politicians born from the ashes of the colonial system : the new types of political leaders who live by sucking the blood of the poor masses. Ngugi's play *I Will Marry You when I Want* is a remarkable example of literature of protest. The play, because it depicted Kenyan leaders' dishonest attitudes toward the poor people, was banned in theaters by Kenyan authorities in the 1980s after it had been published and performed for a while. As the oppressiveness of the colonial and neocolonial administration manifested itself during the early African countries supposed independence, the aforementioned writers became obliged to decry the system that worked against their people. That first generation of African protest writers hid behind different pseudonyms in order to protect themselves while voicing out their bitterness against the parasitic nature of Afro-European co-existence, and the adverse effect this clash of cultures had created on the detriment of the African personality. We can easily add Alexandre Boyidi Awala's *The Poor Chirst of Bomba*, Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy*, and Alex Laguma's *A Walk in the Night* amongst those first set of literary works of protest. It should be stated that these themes of culture clash and their effects pervade most of the poetry of the African writers of the same period such as Gabriel Okara's *Piano and Drums*, *The Fishermans' Invocation*, *Vanity*, and *The Vulture*. Lenrie Peter's poem *We Have Come Home*, also strongly castigates the colonial system and its cultural stereotypes. So is too, Sembène Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood*. They all portrayed the bitterness of African populations under colonial oppression. Even when we examine the works of neo-colonial authors, this protest literature is all pervading. The protest, however, is solely against the comprador petit bourgeois political elite class that took power over from the Europeans. Reading through Ayi Kwe Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Alioune Fantouré's

Tropical Cycle, Festus Iyayi's *Violene*, Achebe's *A Man of the People*, and Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, we find the same authors united in expressing disillusionment over the new turn of events in their countries. They all seems to portray how the lives of their people have degenerated under the rule of their new leaders, with daily deteriorations of all types of life conditions instead of improvement. Finally, another African writer, to name Cheikh Anta Diop, protested against the use foreign languages to write about Africa and call it African literature or culture.

Diop stated :

Without underestimating the value of these African writers of foreign languages in the slightest, do we have the right to consider their writings as the basis of an African culture ? An examination - even superficial - leads us to answer in the negative. Indeed, we believe that every literary work necessarily belongs to the language in which it is written : the works thus written by Africans belong, above all, to these foreign literatures and cannot be considered as the monuments of an African literature.¹¹

Naturally, one of the strongest weapons for protesting this turn of events is through written literature because the oral storytellers was silenced long ago by the oppressive colonial power. Such protest are often based on socio-political and economic occurrences in African society.

4.4. Literature as a Vehicle of Correction

Literature as a corrective vehicle is closely associated with the protest and moral functions. The criticisms and moral lessons illustrated through the literary mind are not for mere fun. A writer may make a caricature of a particular social norm but with

¹¹ Cheikh Anta Diop, « Quand pourra-t-on parler d'une renaissance africaine ? » *Alerte sous les tropiques*, 1946-1960, *Présence Africaine*, p. 33.

one objective in mind : that people may see themselves in the characters so portrayed in the novel or play ; they may recognize their weaknesses and thereby make amends in their own day-to-day behavioral tendencies. In most tragedies, literature seeks to bring our faults in ordinary people so that they can accordingly be corrected for everyone to live happily and better ever after. We are made to see that much of Odewale's misfortunes in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not To Blame*, is due to his hot temper, a warning to people who tempted to behave likewise. Any spectator of this play is invited to identify with these characters and by the time they leave the theater, they are ready to correct such flaws as hot-temperedness. In modern times, films are used in combination to novels for correction. Another example is that, no ruler who has watched *The Rise and Fall of Samuel Doe* would wish to live the same dictatorial lifestyle and come to the same disgraceful end of falling from "grace to grass" to quote Ngugi. The spectator will learn that grave consequences awaited despotism.

4.5. Literature to Glorify Aesthetic Values

Many people see literature as "art for art sake". In this respect, they take literature as a way of celebrating beauty. It is not just a matter of text and context, but the manner of presentation goes a long way in showing the aesthetics of the work of art. A part from being a thing of beauty in its rendition, literature equally admires and glorifies good qualities it observes. It is a thing of immense beauty to read the short highly elaborated description of *Ibadan* in J. P. Clark in his poem of the same name. Also many leaders who have helped to raise the hopes, aspirations and standard of living of their people, have had their names imprinted on the indelible memory of posterity, thanks to the existence of the library of the mind, be it the writer, painter, or the oral praise-singer. Examples of these kinds abound in Africa of such great names as Patrice Lumumba, Cheikh Anta Diop,

Kwame Nkrumah, Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, Leopold S. Senghor, Nelson Mandela, Soundiata Keita, and so on. Contemporary African literature also attempts to glorify every phenomenon or element of nature in Africa that has hitherto been denigrated by parochial colonial Western writers. For example, the African Sun, which is described in European literature as beastly, torturous, and oppressive is now adored, and even worshipped by the African poets as a source of eternal joy and cherished warmth. In Lenrie Peters's poem, *We Have Come Home*, we can witness the joy of the returnees who are back home :

To drink from the cup
Of warm and mellow birdsong
To the hot beaches
Where the boats go out to see ...¹²

The rain is another phenomenon of nature, which Western writers see as a destructive force and which African poetry praises. In describing the same element, J. P. Clark, in his *Night Rain*, sees it as a paradoxical welcomed force for Africans because it has been a part of the people since early creation of the world and they share and celebrate in the joy it has always brought :

And under its (rain) ample soothing hand
Joined to that of the sea
We will settle to sleep of the innocent and free

...¹³

¹² Lenrie Peters, *We Have Come Home*, 1963, (Satellites : Poetry Collection). www.cafeafricana.com/Poetry.html

¹³ J. P. bekederemo Clark, *Night Rain*, (Collected Poems : *Africa Diasporic Literature and Criticism*) Howard University Press, 1958-1988.

Mention can also be made of the creative effects the African environment has on the poet in Gabriel Okara's *Piano and Drums*. When he has heard the sound of the drums (Africa), he said :

My blood ripples, turns torrent,
Topples the years and at once
In my mother's laps a suckling,
At once I'm walking simple
Paths with no innovations,
Rugged, fashioned with the naked
Warmth of hurrying feet and growing hearts
In green leaves and wild flowers pulsing.¹⁴

In this passage, the poem succeeds in giving life and warmth to everything African. Even the flowers respond to the joy of living, as against the brutality, bestiality and unnaturalness associated with the African environment by the Western writer, who, in his narrow-mindedness or biased view, saw the *jungle* of Africa as the *White man's grave*.

Literature as an important aspect of human activity cannot be neglected. It has various functions and those enumerated above are far from being the end of the list. However, the foregoing given few are meant to help us in our work to explain and make readers understand how many of these functions are very often used in African traditions long before the advent of colonization and after, according to circumstances and contexts. They have served for many purposes, in the social, political, economic and cultural contexts, not only in Africa, but in the whole world.

¹⁴ Gabriel Okara's *Piano and Drums (The Fisherman's Invocation)*, Heinemann, 1978.

Most literary books perform one or many of these functions. Here, our aim, in giving some of the functions of literature, is to help people figure out the way they appears in the books under study and how the authors in this comparative study endeavored to counter colonial narratives on African, its people and their cultures.

V. Reviewing Pre-Colonial Gikuyu and Igbo Societies and African Literature

The ways they are descibed by Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, pre-colonial Igbo and Gikuyu societies presented a world where elements of nature co-existed in harmony and certain balance even though they were not a perfect world. Each element of nature has a tremendous place, used for its purpose, and, for example, cannot be displaced without disturbing a certain order or disrupting the peace of the spirits or the cohesion of elements. They converge in a center where stands NTU (God), the Creator. People used to live on their own way, with strong spiritual beliefs and in what can be understood as their conception of life. They shaped their environment according to their needs. It means that they had their own identity which was expressed through specific cultural practices. But all those practices were not written or conceptualized in a Western paradigm or philosophy of life. Conversely, they were sustained by oral traditons which constituted one kind of African identity. And it is this identity which makes African societies exist as a different society with its specificities. In order to survive in a world of various civilizations, this identity needs to be kept and perpetuated while interacting with other cultures.

In every civilization, language and culture are related to political power and social and economic development. And Africa makes no difference or exception to this rule. What is different for Africans is their ways of interpreting the world

and of bringing responses to their existential problems. In this sense Toni morrison gives her account of African literature stating that Critics do not generally associate black people with ideas. They see black people as marginal. Blacks are people, not aliens, she adds. They live, they love and they die. Black people have a story and that story has to be heard. There was an articulate literature before there was a print. There were griots. They memorized the words, the literature. People heard it. Finally, Morisson concludes that it is important that there is sound in her books- that people can hear it, that she can hear it.

In traditional Africa, orality was at the basis of every political, social and economic organization. And because African did not have a tradition in writing, orality was developed and transmitted from generation to generation in order to keep African history alive. Amado Hampâté Bâ said :

The peoples of the black race, not being peoples of writing, have developed the art of speech in a very special way. Although not written, their literature is no less beautiful. How many poems, epics, historical and chivalrous tales, didactic tales, myths and legends with admirable words have been transmitted through the centuries, faithfully carried by the prodigious memory of the men of orality, passionately in love with beautiful language and almost all poems.¹⁵

In this traditional African society, orality was linked to power. In Western African kingdoms, for example, and particularly in Wolof society, the storyteller would literarily say that in the king's court, the authority of the king is an authority of the spoken word. It means that, to enjoy full power and to have a

¹⁵ Amadou Hampâté Bâ, *Lettres à la jeunesse*, 1985 (My translation)

certain authority on his people concerning decision making, the king must be gifted with the art of speech. And the king had to be eloquent to be able to lead and convince his subjects when important decisions are to be made. Generally talking, in traditional western African societies, it was not given to all people to talk to audiences or to deal with important matters. Authority and speech had meant the same thing in this case. Therefore, it remains clear that a man who failed to have the power of the word, would certainly fail to impose himself upon his people as a leader or a ruler, and consequently, would fail to make his orders respected by his fellow community members. This importance given to oral skills in traditional African society is illustrated by Achebe in his novel *Things Fall Apart*. In fact, he showed the reader that the main character Okonkwo has a major flaw in his personality because he stammers when he speaks. As a strong opponent to colonization, it is set from the first chapter that Okonkwo's mission is doomed to failure because he does not master the art of speech despite his social success. And according to Simon Gikandi, Okonkwo is notably characterized by his displacement from Umuofia. It means that undoubtedly, the most obvious symbols of the character's displacement from his culture are his linguistic para-praxes or slip of the tongue, in a community in which mastery of figurative language is the core to social survival and control : *Among the Igbo ; the art of conversation is regarded highly and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten*”,¹⁶ according to Achebe. That is why Okonkwo's stammer is a tragic flaw despite his social ascension. Furthermore, his power as a wrestler and warrior is closely linked to his failure of language : *“He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he used his fists.”*¹⁷ This physical

¹⁶ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, London, Heinemann, 1958, p. 7.

¹⁷ Achebe, *ibid.*

aggression has become a substitute to verbal communication skills. Okonkwo has repressed linguistic competence as a subconscious way of negating the image of his father unoka who is shown to have a sense of the dramatic and to be a verbal virtuoso. From this communication weakness, it can be assumed that even though Okonkwo is seen as the living receptacle of Umuofian values of success, hard work and culture, he is at the same time some kind of marginal because he lacks something very important in his society which is the power to convince people with his communication skills.

African literature also takes many other forms of expression. These include dances, decorations, carvings, paintings, sculptures, weaving, and many other forms of artistic and cultural expressions which have abounded in every part of the continent since the beginning of its people's existence. Literature is defined in its form and scope ; therefore, it will be very restrictive to limit it to its written form. Literature is also the expression of a people's way of life, and its identity.

Many sources converge in the fact that there is something important about oral traditions that is the existence of historical consciousness of Africans. Even if Africans have not written their history, so to say, an essential part of it has been kept and transmitted through oral traditions and rituals and they remain a living patrimony to present time.

The eagerness with which storytellers recount the past of their people, heroes and culture, in many cases, shows the paramount importance given to history as a whole. Here, appears some functions of literature, and those functions are defined according to contexts and circumstances. For long ago, literature has been made to serve many purposes. For example, initiation through proverbs, tales, dances, songs, rites and many other social and religious ceremonies was one way to teach generations of Africans to keep their traditions and to be prepared to navigate

in the world of adults so as to play their partitions in the development of their communities. Using some of these activities above, initiators teach what attitudes the youth has to take, or how to behave, what to value or reject, which traps to avoid when one is engaged in a conquest of manhood, and in the achievement of oneself. Amadou Hampâté Bâ says :

Finally, we can say that myths, tales, legends and children's games have often been a means for the sages of ancient times of transmitting through the centuries in a more or less veiled way, through language and images, knowledge which, received from childhood, will remain engraved in the deep memory of the individual to resurface perhaps. If you want to save lives and knowledge and make them travel through time, said the old Bambaras, entrust them to the children.¹⁸

This quote shows that Africans have their own ways, and that as long as they abide by their communities' codes of conduct, they prevent or avoid lots of troubles. It also substantiates the fact that Africans must design and implement their own system of ruling their societies based on their own cultural background and realities. African society focuses on community rights and solidarity ; it means that rules and laws make people understand that what affect one individual affect the whole community. Individual rights are minimized in traditional Africa because those rights are drowned into those of the community. And in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe tried to show that every member of the community who tries to affirm individual right on the detriment of the community's interests is taken as an outcast and is doomed to fail in his mission. And

¹⁸ Amadou Hampâté Bâ, *Njeddo Dewal : Mère de la Calamité*, Abidjan : Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1985.

that was what happened to Okonkwo when he tried to act alone and killed one of the guard. He violated the laws of the Ummuofians and there started his failure that led to his suicide.

Conversely, Westerners focus on individual rights and individual importance. They talk about individual psychological portfolio, likes, and dislikes. The interests of the community are not given prime importance compared to Africa. In their literature, they praise loneliness, the peaceful and quiet atmosphere of the landscape, its bareness, its beauty, not as being important to the group community but as tremendously important for individual happiness and growth. It means that individual rights come first before community rights. Therefore, Western writers and African ones cannot have the same writing perspectives because they don't have the same objective, they are not addressing the same people and are not living the same realities.

Therefore, when we talk about African literature, we refer to the atmosphere of conviviality, of harmony, of synchrony and of liveliness created by African praise-singers or African authors in their novels to show the true image they want people to see about Africa and Africans. They refer to the history of these people in the way they understand and live it. To claim to understand a people and have the right to talk about them, one has to live their experience and practices. When we talk about African literature in this work, we mean to deal with its oral aspects as dealt with by authors like Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o in their novels under study. They describe kinds of cultural expressions forms that portray African identity in its literary form. So, it will be interesting to see the place of identity in cultural expression and why this type of expressing self cannot be the same as for the western world. African literature, particularly in its oral-infused forms, creates an atmosphere of conviviality, harmony, synchrony, and

liveliness—a cultural texture inherited from the continent’s long-standing traditions of praise-singing, storytelling, and communal performance. This is not merely an aesthetic choice ; it is a deliberate assertion of identity. African authors, especially those like Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, consciously draw from oral heritage to counter reductive or distorted external images of Africa. They present instead a self-defined cultural memory rooted in lived experience and collective history.

The claim that one must “live” a people’s experience to speak authentically of them resonates with many postcolonial thinkers and writers, and you can strengthen this argument by situating it alongside the works and concepts below.

VI. Reinterpreting African Literature with More Literary References

6.1. Oral Tradition as the Foundation of Identity

The Malian writer, Amadou Hampâté Bâ famously stated, “*In Africa, when an old man dies, a library burns.*” His assertion highlights the central role of orality as a living archive. Like Achebe and Ngũgĩ, Hampâté Bâ emphasizes that African identity is transmitted through performance, collective memory, and ritual—not solely through written forms. This helps reinforce our aforementioned point that African literature is inseparable from oral tradition. Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* offers a dramatic monologue rooted in Acholi oral performance. Its rhythm and invocation directly mirror the tone of praise-singing, demonstrating how African literature embodies lived cultural expression rather than merely representing it.

6.2. The Need to Understand Culture from Within

Earlier, we have insisted on the necessity of experiencing a culture to interpret or write about oral literature meaningfully.

This idea strongly echoes writers such as Frantz Fanon and Wole Soyinka.

In fact, Frantz Fanon argued in *Black Skin, White Masks* that identity is not a set of abstract traits but a lived reality shaped by culture and historical memory. To speak for a people without having lived their experience risks reproducing colonial distortions. Wole Soyinka, in essays like “The Fourth Stage,” contends that African worldviews cannot be translated directly into Western categories. The metaphysics of Yoruba ritual, for instance, is intelligible only from within its lived context. This mirrors our early argument about why African modes of self-expression differ fundamentally from Western ones.

6.3. The Distinctiveness of African Cultural Expression

The statement that African expressive forms cannot mirror Western ones aligns with authors like Ngũgĩ’s, Chinua Achebe, and Leopold Sédar Senghor.

In Ngũgĩ’s *Decolonising the Mind*, he argues that African literature must reclaim indigenous languages, oral aesthetics, and local storytelling structures to resist the cultural colonization inherent in Western literary frameworks. Chinua Achebe, in *Things Fall Apart* and later essays, insists that African writers must narrate from a position embedded in indigenous rhythms—proverbs, folktales, communal storytelling. Achebe’s storytelling style is therefore not a stylistic flourish but a philosophical stance, to say that literature must arise from the community’s linguistic and cultural soil. Finally, Leopold Sédar Senghor and the Négritude movement further reinforce the unique emotive and communal quality of African expression. Senghor saw African art as rooted in collective participation and embodied knowledge, contrasting it with Western individualistic aesthetic traditions.

6.4. Literature as Cultural Self-Definition

The focal idea—that African writers craft literature to present the “true image” of Africa—intersects with Ayi Kwei Armah’s work, especially *Two Thousand Seasons*, which portrays literature as a vehicle for historical reclamation and cultural awakening. As far as Buchi Emecheta is concerned, her novels like *The Joys of Motherhood* reframe African womanhood and motherhood in ways that resist externally imposed narratives.

These writers use literature not as a passive repository of cultural memory but as an active tool of self-definition and cultural resistance. By drawing from these figures, we see that African literature—especially in the tradition of Achebe and Ngũgĩ—emerges as a hybrid of oral performance and written narrative. It carries communal memory, asserts cultural identity, and resists Western interpretive frameworks. Its distinctiveness lies not only in form but in philosophy. African literature speaks from lived experience, embodied history, and collective voice, insisting that identity cannot be expressed—nor understood—through Western lenses alone.

Conclusion

African literature as a whole, cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the foundational role of oral traditions. Far from being mere folklore or primitive tales, these spoken forms of expression have served multifaceted functions—from education and moral instruction to protest, social correction, and the glorification of culture and nature. They are the pillars upon which the cultural, spiritual, and intellectual heritage of African societies rests. Writers such as Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong’o, by embedding these oral traditions into their literary works, have not only challenged colonial narratives but also elevated the legitimacy of African worldviews in global

discourse. Their works stand as both a reclamation and a continuation of Africa's storytelling legacy, proving that literature, whether oral or written, remains a powerful tool for shaping identities, preserving history, and resisting domination. As we turn our focus to the pre-colonial societies of the Igbo and Gikuyu, it becomes increasingly clear how deeply rooted these literary functions are in the everyday lives and philosophies of African communities—and why preserving them is essential to understanding Africa's past, present, and future.

This article is very informative in terms of building cultural consciousness. It has strong social reach in academic, cultural, and activist communities because it engages deeply with African oral traditions, postcolonial theory, and the works of Achebe and Ngũgĩ. It appeals especially to scholars, students, and readers interested in decolonization, indigenous knowledge, and African identity. Its utility is equally significant as the text provides historical context, theoretical grounding, and literary analysis that can be used for teaching, research, cultural preservation, and political critique. By highlighting oral literature as the foundation of African cultural memory and by showing how African writers reclaim their narratives through storytelling, this study serves as an effective tool for education, cultural resistance, and intellectual empowerment, though its academic density may limit accessibility for general audiences.

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