

**Thomas Mofolo and Ayi
Kwei Armah: The
Bankruptcy of the Warrior
Tradition and the Quest for
a Legacy of African
Intellectual Heroism**

**Prof. Bouteldja RICHE
Department of English
Mouloud Mammeri
University- Tizi Ouzou**

Abstract

*The following article seeks to show how contemporary African writers signify on the African warrior tradition to elaborate an ideal of heroism more relevant to modern times than the ideal of warrior at the heart of violence and political instability in many African countries today. The discussion is centred on Thomas Mofolo's **Chaka** and Ayi Kwei Armah's **The Healers**.*

Ayi Kwei Armah's interest in the African oral epic tradition manifested itself in many essays and book reviews that he had published earlier than *The Healers* (1978).¹ For example, in a book review of Niane's edition of the Sundjata epic that he contributed to *Black World* in May 1974, Armah writes that the griot has an all-purpose role in traditional West African societies. Apart from being a cultural figure, he fulfils a political, social and educational function. to paraphrase Armah's words, the griot is a professional artist trained to use the subject matter of his people's history as the raw material of his art. As a

Résumé

*Cet article montre comment les écrivains africains contemporains se sont soulevés contre la tradition épique guerrière pour élaborer un idéal d'héroïsme plus adéquat avec les temps modernes que l'idéal guerrier au cœur de la violence et de l'instabilité politique dans plusieurs pays africains aujourd'hui. La discussion se concentre sur l'œuvre de Thomas Mofolo **Chaka** et celle de Ayi Kwei Armah **The Healers**.*

“historian and storyteller,” his “art linked indissolubly the functions of entertainment and education.”² This double function explains his paramount importance as trustee to “historical and communal truth” in traditional West African societies.

Two years later, Armah followed the book review of Niane’s epic with an essay on Thomas Mofolo’s written version of the Zulu epic *Chaka*. Entitled “The Definitive Chaka,” this essay appeared in March-1976 issue of the literary journal *Transition*. Armah praises Mofolo unsparingly for the portrait he made of his epic character Chaka:

There is an admirable, stark clarity in the way Mofolo presents Chaka's childhood and growth. He shows his childhood as the crucial formative period, the seedtime for all the crisis of his adult life. As for the process of Chaka's growth, Mofolo shows it to us as a difficult, complex progression, but so sure is his technique so masterly his grasp of psychological details, that the result has that hyaline quality that often marks the most profound works of genius. Growth becomes a series of crisis, in each of which Chaka moves in an inexorable step to his chosen destiny.³

In spite of this adulation, Armah is not all that reverential towards his predecessor. Indeed, one feels that Armah has inflated the importance of his precursor the better to deflate him. Among other literary offences, he reproaches him for not having questioned the idealism of the Western versions of Zulu history prevailing in his own time. Mofolo has “twisted historical facts because he did not eschew the idealism inherent in colonial theory's articulation of the history of the Zulu as synonymous with the Chaka biography. From Armah's criticism, we gather that Mofolo’s work is successful at the level of *poesis* “maker” but not as “history.”⁴ It follows that Mofolo has not been up to the griot's standards in writing the Zulu epic of *Chaka* (1931).

Armah’s declared interest in the African epic tradition in his non-fiction also shows in his fiction, particularly in *The Healers*. No sooner has he started unwinding the narrative thread of this fiction than he makes the traditional invocation to his precursors to help him in his oral performance of the Akan/Ashanti epic that traces the collapse of the Ashanti Empire following the Second Anglo-Ashanti War (1873-1874), what in Ghanaian history is called the *Sagrenti Sa*. Armah starts addressing himself as “child of the Anona masters.”

Anona is of one of the seven clans constituting what is usually known as the Akan. It is famous for the eloquence of its guild of griots, for which the parrot stands as a totemic expression.⁵ Apart from announcing that he descends from the most important Akan clan, Armah invokes a distinguished line of griots ranging from Gnankouman Doua, griot to Maghan Kon Fata, Sunjata's father. Gnankouman Doua, as Isidore Opewho writes it in *The Epic in Africa*⁶, is considered as the muse, the Calliope of African epic poetry. Armah rounds off his invocation by calling the Zulu praise singer Magolwane "the poet of the soaring silver voice," Sundjata's griot Fasseke Belen Tegui, "master of masters in the arts of eloquence," and most unexpectedly Thomas Mokopu Mofolo, whom he addresses as follows:

Send me words, Mokopu Mofolo. Send me words of eloquence. Words are mere wind, but wind too has always been part of our work, this work of sowers for the future, the work of storytellers, the work of masters in the arts of eloquence. Give me strength for this work, and give your own wounded soul reason to smile, seeing in the work of one who came after you was not, quick sign that your long, silent suffering a small meant, after all, to be in vain.

Neil Lazarus, one of Armah's most pertinent critics, wonders why Armah makes the most provocative apostrophes to a man (Mofolo) who was not strictly speaking an oral poet but rather a writer like himself. He develops the argument that Armah presses forward with his project, "formally initiated in *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) of recuperating and more specifically "traditionalizing" Mofolo's work.⁷ We subscribe entirely to Lazarus's point though he has not fully fleshed it out. Indeed, as Lazarus has underlined it, the traditionalizing swerve from Mofolo's work shows itself even in *Two Thousand Seasons* wherein Armah re-appropriates three characters from *Chaka*:⁸ Isanusi, Chaka's diviner, Nandi his mother, and Noliwe, his beloved. Whereas in Mofolo these characters function mainly as negative figures in Armah they assume a positive function. Isanusi sheds his Mephistophelian traits to become an *Okeayame*, a master in the arts of eloquence, who with a group of twenty initiates triggers a rebellion against the puppet king *Koranche*. As for Noliwe, she is no longer the victim sacrificed on Chaka's altar of power, but a "pathfinder."

However, the traditionalizing of Mofolo's work is more obvious in *The Healers*. As we have noted above, Armah's critique of Mofolo's work appeared in his article on *Chaka* published in *Transition* two years before the publication of *The Healers* in 1978. There is enough evidence in Armah's novel which suggests that it is a follow-up or a sequel to his critique of Mofolo's version of the Zulu epic in his essay "The Definitive Chaka". For example, while Armah's invocation of a long line of griots may be construed as a common technique in epic tradition, it posits him as the legitimate heir to that tradition. In his capacity as literary legatee and custodian of an oral epic tradition, Armah has no problem of "priority" with Thomas Mofolo whom he imagines as being only his immediate epic precursor. His Ashanti epic has come to "complete" the latter's "work" whose author he sees as having remained in a "long silent suffering."

There is some truth in Armah's statement above because Thomas Mokopu Mofolo interrupted his literary career shortly after the publication of *Chaka*. So far critics have not elicited the reasons behind Mofolo's renunciation to the world of letters. But there are indications in his correspondence showing that the "ideological environment" in which he wrote was too constraining for Mofolo to go on with an artistic career which took him increasingly in the direction of cultural rehabilitation. Mofolo received his education in a missionary school, taught in one of them, and his books *Moeti*, *Pitseng* and *Chaka* were printed and published by the same school. Because the former two complied more or less with the Christian missionary ideology that prevailed at the time, they were given wide acclaim in missionary circles. The case was strikingly different with *Chaka*, which includes some elements from Zulu culture and history that deeply disturbed the missionaries. In the latter's view, the inclusion of African culture in the Christian convert's epic will hinder the cause of progress. Worse, it will wean back the few "saved" Africans back into the fold of Satan. In the light of the strictures passed on the work by the missionaries to whom Mofolo owes his job as teacher, it is not hard to see why he dropped out a promising writing career.⁹

It is for Armah who came to write in the less constraining conditions of independent Africa to complete the return to the ancestral art of the griot that Mofolo had left unfinished. His acceptance of the mission manifests itself in the priority accorded to the "scene of orature" over the "scene of writing"¹⁰ in his fiction. To

this end, Armah makes an authorial “intrusion” in the first part of his book to make it clear that his story is no simple murder mystery though it starts like one. Nor is it a “drooling, idiot tale” (p.2) full of Shakespearean and Faulknerian sound and fury signifying nothing. If his story starts in *medias res* it is simply because he wants us to listen to and read it as an epic. We are reminded that his story is not “told by an unconnected tongue [wherein] the middle hurls itself at the astonishing ear before the beginning has even to be mentioned.” (p.2)

Moreover, in the manner of the griots of the good old days, Armah also reminds us of the progressive stages and the broad subject of the work after prefatory comments and observations made about its form and structure. In a series of rhetorical self-questioning, he lets us know that his story does not “belong to any confusing age.” It did not reach back to “the time of the poet Nyankoman Dua, seven centuries ago,” nor did it take place “ten centuries ago, when Ghana was not just a memory [or] in that marvellous black time before the desert was turned desert, thirty centuries [thirty stands for a great number in Akan] ago”. His story is not “so old; it “is just over a century old” referring to late nineteenth century Ghana at the time of the Second Anglo-Ashanti War. Many other examples can be gathered from Armah’s fiction to convincingly argue that Armah seeks the influence of the African oral epic tradition. However, since the purpose here is the dialogue between *The Healers* and Mofolo's *Chaka*, the present discussion will focus only on those aspects of form and ideology in which the former swerves from the latter in its re-definition of the ideal of heroism.

G.J.B. Watson offers a valuable clue as to where to start when looking for how writers belonging to the epic tradition influence each other. He writes that “from one angle, the development of the epic tradition might be described as a series of re-definitions or refinements of the notion of heroism or the heroic.”¹¹ With this statement in mind, one may ask the following question: How does Armah revise the Mofolian image of the African epic hero? In response, we would argue that Armah has drawn his epic heroes more in accordance with African/Akan tradition than the Christian/ missionary ideology of his precursor. Behind Armah's conception of epic characters are the traditional Akan concepts of soul (*Okra*), personality (*Sunsum*), destiny (*Nkrabea*), and that of superman (*Opanin*) one the one hand, and anthropological findings about African intellectual brotherhoods on the other.

Man, according to traditional Akan thought, has an Okra¹² (a soul) which he receives from the Creator (*Oneyame*) before he was born into the world. This *Okra* is part of God in every man. It is the presence of it in man which makes him a living human being. It obtains leave from *Oneyame* to come into this world and in doing so it takes with it an errand or *Nkrabea*. At death, the *Okra* leaves the body and is believed to return to God/*Oneyame* to give an account of its earthly existence. If it has managed to fulfil its destiny by becoming perfect it is allowed to remain in heaven, if found still imperfect it will be reincarnated and will have to return to earth. In other words, the *Akrabiri* people with thoroughly bad *Okra*, those who have omitted to fill it with goodness are refused permission to stay in the upper kingdom.

The *sunsum* is an intangible element in man. It accounts for character (*suban*), disposition, special mental endowments and the degree of excellence one attains. It is brought out in the appearance and the aggregate of peculiar qualities which constitute personal individuality, especially moral qualities. The Akan recognise the *sunsum* as the spiritual cause of ill-health, quite apart from the physiological causes, which they also recognise as possible sources of illness. This explains the closeness between religion and the practice of medicine in traditional Akan community. It is believed that not only can the *sunsum* be attacked by witchcraft to cause it illness, but also that evil thoughts in one's head may overburden one's *sunsum* or encumber it and cause that person to become ill. The confessions, which so often precede traditional treatment of diseases, are regarded as a form of unburdening, or a casting off of the load which has burdened the *sunsum*. But that is not all. The Akan have established certain institutions in their society which give support to the above-stated ritual practice. One such institution is the *Apo* or *Odwira* festival celebrated not only in order to make individuals speak their mind and make their “*sunsum* feel cool and quieted”¹³ but also to help the whole clan, which is also believed to have a *sunsum*, to unburden itself of evil and re-establish its social equilibrium.

J.B.Danquah suggests that in the traditional Akan world, which Armah has fictionalised in *The Healers*, there is a category of exceptional men – “supermen” whose *okrabea*, mission in English, is to salvage the community. He puts it in this way in *The Akan Doctrine of God*:

In the Superman, who may be a great hero, a great warrior, or a great statesman, or a great religious leader, a great thinker - we sense the consciousness of an evangelizing spirit of reformatory mission to save the community or even mankind in the name of God, the Nananoum (the ancestors) or *Nyame*. In him the consciousness of some thing sublime comes near to experience. This sublimity [sic] means there is now something at work which is more pervasive or extensive than the accustomed horizon of the community.¹⁴

This self-transcendence of the “superman” beyond the acknowledged ethos of the community is precisely one of the prominent traits which give epic proportions to the central characters Damfo, Densu, Asamoa Nkwanta and Araba Jesiwa in *The Healers*. All four of them stand out of the accustomed horizon of the community in the way they question Akan/Ashanti orthodoxies be they religious, political, institutional, or historical, orthodoxies that they regard as being contrary to the welfare of community.

The same J.B. Danquah writes that “what the Akan regards to be the good is the family. The Akan thus hold the family [i.e., the interest of the community] to be the Supreme Good”.¹⁵ Accordingly, Armah has kept involving his four major characters in one type of redemptive mission or another: Densu rescues Anan, Damfo cures the diseased *sunsum* of Araba Jesiwa and Asamoa Nkwanta, who in turn partly saves both Densu and the Ashanti army from complete defeat. Echoing his fellow Ghanaian writer, Armah has the master-healer Damfo remind his neophyte Densu that their mission is collective rather than individual. During one of his numerous training sessions when he emphasises the rigorous demands of the healer's vocation like that of renouncing to the pleasures of the world, Damfo stresses that it is no only the individual *sunsum* who needs healing:

Sometimes a whole people need healing work. Not a tribe not a nation. Tribes and nations are just signs that the whole is diseased. The healing work that cures whole people is the highest work, far higher than the cure of single individuals. (p.100)

Since the healer is also an awakener of people “who have slept too long,” Damfo reiterates that his ultimate task is the salvation of the entire back race regarded as a family:

Not only that. The Akan community itself was just a little piece of something whole - a people that knew only this one name we so seldom hear these days Ebibir man. That was the community of all back people. (p.102)

In Armah's fiction, the healers have not managed to salvage the community, but they are for much in the heroic resistance that their country opposed to the British invasion during the second Anglo-Ashanti War. In addition to dignity in defeat, they reveal for the contemporary Ghanaian reader the spiritual disease behind the political demise of the Ashanti Empire. Indeed, it can be rightly claimed that *The Healers* is as much an enactment of integrity and therapy as it is about integrity and therapy. In the manner of Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of The Earth*, Armah delivers us case histories of characters with warped souls that the healers in the Eastern forest cure by making them delve into their repressed past. Araba Jesiwa and General Asamoah Nkwanta are cases in point. True neither to themselves nor to the spiritual ethos of the community, are these two characters driven to mental anguish, which Damfo the master healer/therapist undoes through traditional eliciting techniques of self-analysis.

Set in a broader context, the diagnosed spiritual disease is symbolic of the "colonization of the mind", or the affirmation of ego-centric values at the expense of the entire community. Admittedly, the healers have failed to save their people in the world of the novel, but their tasks as "awakener[s] of the people who have slept too long" seem to have been accomplished. As awakeners, they do not belong to the category of people called *Akrabiri* (people with a bad soul) but rather to the "beautiful ones" (people who have filled their souls with goodness), a goodness that is defined in terms of self-transcendence on behalf of the community.

The ideas of "soul", "destiny", and "salvation" are also central in Mofolo's portrayal of his central characters in *Chaka*. But unlike Armah, Mofolo does not relate them to traditional African beliefs. For the reasons already stated, he goes to the sources of the Faustian tradition to delineate his epic character and plot his actions.¹⁶ As Armah asserts, Mofolo presents Chaka's childhood as the "seedtime" of his Faustian destiny. Born royal but out of wedlock, Chaka undergoes a series of crises that gradually lead him to be obsessed with the possession of power. The complications that the major

character meets start when set on exile because of his stepmother's jealousies. Exile leads him outside his father's kingdom i.e., outside the gates of the human city, and reduces him into an *unmensch* (a subhuman). It is in this condition that he meets another *unmensch* a non-human diviner Isanusi. Isanusi makes the hero trade off his soul, love and humanity for a power that would make of him an *ubermensch*, a superman in his community. Isanusi is to Chaka what Mephistopheles is to Faustus. He is a devilish temper who secures the hero's soul in exchange of a promise of kingly power. The deal goes through as Isanusi assigns Chaka two of his lieutenants Malunga and Ndlebe as henchmen.

Armah's swerve from his precursor is apparent in the different direction that his hero's growth to maturity takes. Densu's childhood experiences, his conversations with Araba Jesiwa, his friendship with Anan, his fascination with and implicit respect for Damfo - have developed in him the sense of self-transcendence of the "superman" that he also owes in part to hereditary factors. The storyteller tells us that Densu's father had the same critical distance to the royal establishment as his son. Hence, whereas Chaka's childhood experiences increasingly lead him to lose the sense of sociability and develop an obsession for power, Densu's foster in him a progressive contempt of political manipulation, and manipulators like his guardian Eja Ababio. Densu becomes one of the disciples of Damfo (the inspirer in Akan) whereas Chaka chooses the devil's party (Isanusi/Mephistopheles) who unleashes his Macbethian murderous impulses.

It is therefore plausible to argue that Armah's revisionist attitude to his precursor's epic characterisation seems to proceed from his realisation that Mofolo is of the devil's party without knowing it. His use of the Faustian "master narrative" as a prop for the construction of his warrior-character encourages appropriation. As a character in a book that purports to be an epic, Chaka's destiny is linked to that of the Zulu nation by indissoluble threads. It is Chaka himself who gives his people the name (Amazulu) by which they come to know themselves. Chaka's life history, therefore, becomes the history of the Zulu people, and his accursed share as a Faustian figure is his as much as theirs. So indirectly, by drawing his epic character in terms of the Faustian tradition, Mofolo undermines his initial project of giving a human dimension to Chaka, and becomes unwittingly an accomplice to the white missionary's worry and doubt about the black man's soul.

There is no such worry and doubt about the black man's soul (Okra) in Armah's work whose dominant figure is not that of the warrior king but of the healer who is critical of the excesses of unbridled political ambition and power. The dominant position that Armah accords to the healer shows the extent of the critical distance he has taken from the warrior traditions in which Mofolo's *Chaka* is steeped. In an Africa bedevilled by what James W. Fernandez calls the "Shaka Complex,"¹⁷ it is arguably impossible for Armah to treat his subject with the same old heroic spirit as his precursor did in the colonial period. Armah substitutes the heroic ideal of the healer/intellectual for that of the warrior-chief that finds one of its best expressions in Mofolo's *Chaka*.¹⁸ We have already traced this ideal of intellectual hero or healer to the Akan religious world view as developed by J.B. Danquah and W.E Abrahams. The second source from which Armah seems to have drawn his ideal of intellectual heroism is Sutherland Rattray's anthropological study of what he calls, in *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (1927)¹⁹, the "oldest brotherhood" of medicine men and priests. However, we should qualify our claim because in going into the European archives, i.e., into Rattray's documentation of the Akan intellectual brotherhood, Armah does not simply duplicate Rattray's anthropological findings. If Rattray, to V.Y Mudimbe's words in another context, describes the Akan healer society to "establish [it as] a reality of knowledge," Armah "reads, challenges [Rattray's anthropological discourse] as a way of explicating and defining its culture, history, and being."²⁰ In Armah's hands, the mysterious aura with which Rattray surrounds the healers dissipates to give place to history.

This attempt to re-construct, re-invent an African intellectual tradition or heritage out of anthropological archives reminds us of what Hugh Trevor Roper writes about the revival of the Druidist tradition by the Romantic Welsh writers.²¹ According to Roper, the latter have clipped the ornate lore of superstition surrounding druidism to elaborate out of it an Irish intellectual tradition. Similarly, Armah dispels the "fairies [*Moatia* in Akan] of forest monsters [*Sasabonsam*]," which, in the words of Rattray, are supposed to be the "mentors" of healer apprentices seeking a "doctor's degree," to restore the master-healer to his primary place as a major cultural figure in Akan community. Unlike Rattray, Armah does not recall the existence of the "oldest brotherhood" of medicine men to "lament" its disappearance. On the contrary, he celebrates the healers' cultural

tradition by re-conceiving it as a metaphor for Africa's mind and its resistance to the European epistemological domination over Africa and the African. So we can affirm that he looks at resistance to European colonial penetration into the African continent not in martial but primarily in cultural and intellectual terms. It is signally important to note that at the end of his fiction the healers as an intellectual brotherhood have outlived the demise of the Ashanti Empire only to prepare themselves for further cultural and intellectual resistance.

Naturally, the heroics of the British imperial troops that brought out the collapse of the Ashanti Empire are not spared Armah's biting satire/Menippea in the process of laying bare the African warrior tradition. For example, Armah includes a parody of Henry Stanley's newspaper coverage of the Anglo-Ashanti war that hailing the heroic feats of the British army commanders. One of the hailed "heroes" is Captain Glover of whom Stanley wrote the following:

It was not yet daylight, but I sauntered towards the river [the Black Volta in the Eastern part of Ghana], whose noble breadth was overhung by a thick haze, and whose bank was along a black line of mangroves. [...] The stream was but 300 yards from the camp [at Ada]. The landing-place was about 500 yards from the headquarters. I soon discovered the sturdy form of Governor Glover striding hither and thither, and recognized his cool calm voice giving orders. He was superintending personally the loading of the Lady of the Lake for an up-river trip with ammunition; he was giving orders to a blacksmith; he was showing a carpenter what his day's duties were to be; he was speaking to the engineer about his boilers. [...] He was rebuking the Accra king, Taki for the dilatoriness of his men. He was general-in chief, [...] commissariat officer, [...] general supervisor of all things [...] conductor of great and small things, a most remarkable man, and in short the impellent force of his army. ²²

In *The Healers*, Densu, like Henry Stanley, crosses the Firaw river [the Black Volta in Akan] at dawn to join Glover's military camp at Ada. However, his reportage about Glover turns down Stanley's magnifying glass to give us instead a diminutive picture of Glover. Densu's/Armah's Glover is no longer the know-all humanist frontiersman that Stanley makes of him. Sometimes, he is described as a sulky child imploring African chiefs to stop fighting their tribal wars

and follow him in his mounted expedition to Kumasi. At other times, his African army vanishes as quickly as it is gathered once the African chiefs have what they desire most from him. And while at times, he is described as a self-abused paternalist towards what he considers as his undisciplined African “children”, at other times, he is portrayed as a childish figure having bad dreams because General Wolseley wants to march against Kumasi before the appointed time, thus depriving him of his share of military glory. Armah is at his most eloquent in his heroic mockery of Glover in the following:

Here indeed was the white man in action. Glover the godlike, Glover the white man descended among the black people to do magical wonders ... Here he was, the man who knew himself as true magician when it came to getting black people for the profit of white people. Here he was, the one white man who could boast he could tell black men to do anything, no matter how difficult, and they would do it immediately out of love for him, Glover. Here he was, Glover the father of the Hausa fighters, protector of the loving slaves.

Armah is also no less satirical in his portrait of other British historical figures involved in the Anglo-Ashanti Wars. For instance, the reader can hear the tongue-in-cheek alleluia or hosanna in Armah’s mock-serious description of the crippled General Garnet Wolseley’s entry into Kumasi. This entry is rendered in terms ironically reversing Jesus’ entry into the city of Jerusalem as celebrated in Palm Sunday ritual. Pegged on Ashanti beliefs and rituals, the entry reads as the second coming announcing not the re/birth of a civilised order of things, but of things falling apart with the slouching of the beast into Kumasi/ Bethlehem. It has to be observed that this satire is not directed solely against General Garnet Wolseley. As the British historian, Alan Lloyd makes it clear in his *Drums to Kumasi*, it is H.H. Prince Christian Victor of Schelswing-Hostein, Queen Victoria’s son-in-law in Sir Francis Scott’s expedition of 1895-6, and not Sir Garnet Wolsley who entered the city of Kumasi “riding an ass”. Alan Lloyd writes that

Prince Henry, riding a donkey and carrying a small white umbrella to shield his face from the sun, was given celebrity treatment by the chiefs of the Protectorate and their people, who lined the road on tip-toe to catch a glimpse of the husband of the Queen’s daughter.²³

This character condensation or doubling is also obvious at the end of Armah's fiction. The last scene shows Wolseley carried baby-like in a wicker basket by his West Indian Riflemen before being canoed to his homeward-bound boat speaks as much of Garnet Wolseley as of Prince Christian. Allan Lloyd has this to say about the latter's retreat from Sir Francis Scott's expedition of 1895-6:

Scott was adamant and, on 17 January, after a raging tornado had cost the column of sleepless and miserable night, a British army entered Kumasi for the second time in history [...Prince Henry of Battenberg had already been stricken with the disease and carried back to the coast, where he died aboard *HMS Blonde* two days after the expedition reached its destination.²⁴

The satirical edge in Armah's description of the departure of Wolseley/Prince Christian comes from the fact that he makes it read like the Fanti/Akan funeral rites for fishermen. Wolseley /Prince Christian – the false fisherman / redeemer of the black people – is given his last farewell to the sea. The West Indian fishermen who row Wolseley/Prince Christian in the canoes are reminiscent of the *Asafo*, the paramilitary organisation (guild) of fishermen who, in the traditional funeral rites of one their own, paddle the deceased beyond the waves to let him “make several sweeps off-shore in farewell gesture.”²⁵

It follows that the demotion of enshrined British heroes of the Anglo-Ashanti wars is signified through the ritual framework in which their martial achievements are narrated. Armah's fiction starts with and ends with the *Apo/Odwira* festival. Rattray says the following about this Akan ritual:

The *Odwira* or *Apafram* was an annual ceremony held in September in honour and propitiation of the Ashanti Kings who had gone elsewhere and for the cleansing of the whole nation for the defilement. [...] The king presented a sheep, which was killed for a repast for the ghosts, at the same time addressing them as fellow *Afe anoahyia, ya be two odwira, omma bone biara mma, na afe foforo noto yem boko*. The edges of the years have come round, we are about to celebrate the rites of *Odwira*; do not permit any evil at all to come upon us and let the new year meet us peacefully.²⁶

Indeed, it is with the fictionalisation of the *Odwira* festival that *The Healers* begins. But unlike its traditional counterpart, it does not end

with the exorcism of evil, but with the defilement of the body polity by the murder of the heir-apparent Appiah by the usurper Eja Ababio (the reborn) and the announcement that “the new year (1873) will not come peacefully” on the Akan. Eja Ababio informs Densu on several occasions during the ritual games that the white man is preparing war against the Ashanti. The story ends just as it has started, that is, with the celebration of the *Odwira* ceremony for the year 1874 (the end of the Second Anglo-Ashanti War which lasted for a whole year). However, this time the ceremony closes with the false redeemer Wolseley/ Prince Christian bundled out of the land of the Akan just as if he were an embodiment of the evil that accursed the previous year. His departure is an occasion for the celebration of a “new dance”, a new carnival to the rhythm of *Highlife* music, which in the words of one of the healers Ama Nkrom, promises the retrieval of the unity of the African people.

Halo satirical poetry or satire is one of the hallmarks of the *Odwira* festival. During this festival people are licensed to satirise their elders through the recitation of *halo*. Armah does just this when he pokes fun at those African warrior chiefs who have sold out to the British conquerors for their proper interests. In the manner of *halo* poets, Armah compares the warrior chiefs to babies and to dunces, more concerned with receiving their share of gin from the white man than the good of their community. The warrior chiefs’ outdoor ceremony (*Nana Nteate* in Akan) turns into an ostentatious parade. Instead of traditional communion with the people, the parade leads the chiefs into Garnet Wolseley’s military camp to receive their orders. At the end of their palaver with the white general, they have gathered in the palace of one of them for sharing the bottles of gin which Garnet Wolseley has given them in exchange for their agreement to help him in his imperialist design.

The gathering of the warrior chiefs offers a pitiable sight. The first guest to arrive to King Atia’s palace is Nana Kwesi Dae, King of Denchira. The sorrow for the loss of his kingdom to the Ashanti has turned him into an alcoholic. He walks “like a toddler,” and wears a “ludicrous-looking crown, a small shell cone hat which insufficiently on top of his head.”(p.205)The other kings to join him are Nana Amoona from Anomabo, and Nana Tsibu from Assen. The latter’s skin is of such smoothness that it “was hard to think of him as a grown man and not a large pampered baby.”(Ibid) One of the royals has dropped his African name to call himself King Solomon, while yet

another is renamed Field Marshal Bentil. Others are Blankson, Moore, Thompson and Robertson (p.206), an array of English or English-sounding names, hilariously out of place in this traditional African setting. The very large number of “kings” with ramshackle crowns perched on their heads, makes the gathering take, from the outset, the look of a farcical display, and the comparison of some of these kings to babies (pretentious magnificence compared with innocent infancy) prepare us for their infantile conduct during the petty transactions about Wolseley’s “gift of drinks.” So Armah uses *halo* or satire licensed during the *Odwira* festival to demote the Akan warrior chiefs to clowns.

All in all, Armah has integrated both satirical and epic elements in *The Healers*, but his fiction remains basically epic since he does not play up the satirical elements to such massive proportions as to displace its *mythos* into a mock-epic. The preservation of the epic dimension has much to do with the fact that it is concerned with a type of heroic resistance to imperial domination not recorded in official Ashanti historical versions of the *Sagrenti Sa*. Such a serious historic subject calls more for the griot’s art rather than that of the halo/satirist poet. As British historian Martin Gray pertinently observes, the Ashanti wars “remain a glorious instance of Black Power,” no matter how much we try to make of them a “hideous example of African disunity and oppression.”²⁷ *The Healers* transcends this divided and discordant vision of the Ashanti wars to celebrate a “dance of the forest”²⁸ wherein the main celebrants are neither “glorious” warriors nor their victims, but healers/intellectuals tending the wounded soul (Okra) of the black community.

Moreover, Armah’s version of the Ashanti epic is a completion of Mofolo’s version of the Zulu epic *Chaka*. This completion comes out in the traditionalization of the ideology and form of the precursor’s work. In its ideology, Mofolo’s epic affiliates itself to the warrior tradition to which it adds a Faustian dimension. Conversely, *The Healers* harks back to one of the forgotten African traditions of intellectual heroism that finds two of its best expressions in J.B. Danquah’s *The Akan Doctrine of God* and Sutherland Rattray’s *Religion and Art in Ashanti*. The priority that Armah’s fiction accords to the heroic ideal of the intellectual over that of the warrior arises from its author’s realisation that “effective warriorhood” in post-colonial Africa “depends on economic strength, [on the decolonization of the mind], rather than martial posturing and machismo.”²⁹

Finally, the traditional dimension of *The Healers* shows in the comparatively greater importance that it gives to orature. Our analysis leads us to observe that Mofolo's *Chaka* is Euro-centric in its artistic principles. Two of its dominant features are irony and Christian allegories which make the book read more like a moral tale about the Fall of the African/Zulu Man/Nation than the epic Mofolo had initially set out to write in a bid for cultural/historical rehabilitation. Conversely, *The Healers* eschews such novelistic techniques as irony for those of speakerly texts like griotature. Among the latter, we can list the authorial intervention in the story with its climactic alerts,³⁰ formulaic style,³¹ announcement of theme, narrative digression, Akan/African phrasal turns, circumscription of the cultural setting, and a deliberately didactic tone.³⁰ These techniques, and others we have not mentioned, make the book assume a depth of empathy that leaves no room for the ironical distancing of his precursor. More importantly, in the redeployment of African literary techniques for the epic celebration of African ingenuity and intellectual heroism, Armah also mimics and subverts Rudyard Kipling's imperial fiction *Kim*. In this doubly corrective impulse to colonial fiction (fiction written by both Africans and Europeans about colonies in the colonial period) Armah has deliberately put on a postcolonial garb by writing back to the empire whose hegemony was exercised as much on fellow African writers on the colonial periphery as their European counterparts in the centre.

Notes and References

- ¹. Ayi Kwei Armah (1978), *The Healers* (London: Heinemann 1979). Subsequent references included in the text are to this edition.
- ². Ayi Kwei Armah, "Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali," in **Black World**, Vol. XXXIII, N°7 (May 1974), p. 51.
- ³. Cf. Ayi Kwei Armah, in "The Definitive Chaka", Vol. 5th (March 1976), p.11. The article also appeared as "Chaka", in *Black World*, Vol. XXVI, N° 4 (February 1975), pp. 84-90.
- ⁴. The concepts of "history" i.e., "narrator as enquirer" and "poesis" (maker in English) are borrowed from Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg's *The Nature of Narrative* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 265-266.
- ⁵. Cf. Eva L.R. Meyerowitz, *The Early History of the Akan States of Ghana* (London, Red candle Press, 1978), p. 187.
- ⁶. Cf. Isidore Okpewho, *The Epic in Africa: Towards a Poetics of the Oral Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), p.235.
- ⁷. A. Saber, "The Implication of Technique in *The Healers*", in *Research in African Literatures*, V. 13, N° 14 (1982), pp. 488-498.
- ⁸. Thomas Mofolo, *Chaka*, trans. F.H. Dutton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1931).
- ⁹. For a complete discussion about the "ideological environment" in which Mofolo wrote his book, see Daniel Kunene, *Thomas Mofolo and the Emergence of Written Sesotho Prose* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1980).
- ¹⁰. Cf. Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford University Press, 1980), p.198.
- ¹¹. G.J.B. Watson, "James Joyce's *Ulysses*: Epic Novel," in *The Epic: Development in Criticism*, ed. R.P. Drapper (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 198.
- ¹². Our discussion of these concepts is inspired from Kofi Asare Opoku, "The destiny of Man in Akan Traditional religious Thought" in *Africa in Transition Series*, 2, (1975), pp. 3-15. Cf. W.E. Abrahams, "The Akan Theory of Man and Society", in his *Mind of Africa* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1969).
- ¹³. Cf. Sutherland Rattray (1923), *Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 153.
- ¹⁴. J.B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God* (London: Frank Cass and Co, 1944), pp. 95-96.
- ¹⁵. *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁶. For other discussions of the Faustian theme in Mofolo's book, see, op. Cit., Daniel Kunene, *Thomas Mofolo and the Emergence of Sesotho Prose*.

¹⁷. James W. Fernandez, "The Shaka Complex," in *Transition* 29 (1967), pp. 11-15.

¹⁸. For the adaptation of the Zulu epic of *Chaka* in African Literature written in French and English see, Donald Burgess, *Shaka, King of the Zulus in African Literature* (Three Continents Press, 1976).

¹⁹. Sutherland Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), p.38.

²⁰. V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (London: James Currey, 1990), p. XI.

²¹. Cf. Hugh Trevor-Roper, "From a Death to a View: The Hunt for the Welsh Past in the Romantic Period", in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. E.J. Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

²². Alan Llyod, *Drums to Kumasi* (London: Longman, 1964), p.122.

²³. Ibid., p. 57.

²⁴. Ibid.p.166.

²⁵. Cf. Michael A. Coronel, "Fanti Canoe Decoration," in *Atlantic Perspective*, (November 1978), V-XIII, pp.56. Coronel adds that the "crew members later bear the coffin in a slow meandering pace through the beached canoes to the site of the public funeral. The festival creates an assemblage of varied art forms: music, dancing, praise poems and interpretative re-enactments." p. 56.

²⁶. Op.cit., Rattray, Sutherland Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, pp.127-128.

²⁷. Martin Gray and Robin Law, Eds. *Images of Africa* (London: University of Sterling Press 1990), p.12.

²⁸. Wole Soyinka, *A Dance of the Forests* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

²⁹. Aidan Southall, "The Bankruptcy of the Warrior Tradition," in Ali Mazrui, Ed. *The Warrior Tradition in Modern Africa* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1977), p.166.

³⁰. In our analysis, we have mentioned the appeal the storyteller makes to his epic precursors to help narrate momentous events in his story. These appeals alert us to the climactic points in the narrative. Okpewho attributes the use of climactic alerts in African orature to a comparatively acute "sense of the moment in the performing oral artist." (Op.cit., Okpewho, p.212) The storyteller's sense of the moment in *The Healers* shows strongly in the climactic chant included in the "Omens" chapter that prefigures the fall of Kumasi in Part Six of the book. Two of these omens are particularly sinister for an Ashanti reader. The first is the destruction by

thunder of the Odum tree panted by one of the founders of the *Asanteman* (Ashanti nation in English), the seventeenth-century priest Okomfo Anoché. According to prophecy, the day the tree will be thunderstruck the *Asanteman* will fall apart. For further information about this prophecy, see Eva L.R. Meyerowitz, *The Early History of the Akan States of Ghana* (London: Red Candle Press, 1974), pp.171-173. The included story of the python devouring the porcupine and leaving only its quills is no less ominous and sinister. The porcupine (*Kotoko* in vernacular) stands for the Ashanti war machine. One of the Ashanti war cries goes as follows: “Like the needles of the porcupine, if you kill a thousand, a thousand will come.” For further information about Ashanti/Ghanaian national symbols, see Jean Marie Allman, *The Quills of the Porcupine* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993) In his *Ashanti*, Rattray reports the Ashanti myth of creation and fertility wherein the creation of the original couple, the sky god (*Onyame*) sends the python (*Onini*) into the Bosommuru river to sprinkle them with water and to deliver them a message ordering them to prosper on Earth. Seen in the context of this myth, the python stands for Onyame destroying the army of the impious Ashanti. The message it delivers is not one of fertility but one of imminent destruction by the British troops.

³¹. According to Okpewho, the “formula is a feature of oral composition among African bards of heroic narrative songs.” Some formulae “are useful for the formal growth of the story” whereas “other repeated lines and messages only contribute toward a fullness of effect in the performance (Op. cit. Okpewho, 1979, pp.138-139)