AFRICA'S GOLDEN AGE DEBUNKED: A STUDY OF THE SOURCES OF SELECT BLACK AFRICAN HISTORICAL NOVELS

THESIS

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis constitutes my own work and that it has not been presented either in part or in whole for the award of a degree in any other university.

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Abstract

The main thesis of this dissertation is that even a casual analysis of African writing reveals that contemporary African literature has and is still undergoing a distinctive metamorphosis. This change, which amounts to a significant departure from the early fifties, derives its creative impulse from demonic anger and cynical iconoclasm and is triggered by the mind-shattering disillusion that followed independence. The proclivity towards tyranny and the exploitation of the ruled in modern Africa is traced by radical African creative writers to an ancient source: the legendary and god-like rulers of pre-colonial Africa. Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* and Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers* hypothesize that past sins begot present sins.

The legendary warrior heroes of the past, whose glory and splendour were once exalted in African writing, are now ruthlessly disentombed and paraded as miscreants and despots, who not only brutalized and sold their people into slavery but also ideologically fabricated their own legends and myths in order to maximize their tyrannical power. The preoccupation of these works is, therefore, to divest the ancient heroes of their false glory.

Contemporary critics tend to perceive this anti-traditional posture purely as a modern trend in African literature. The truth of the matter, however, is that the literary foundations of this anti-nativist/anti-Afrocentric literary tradition were laid by Thomas Mofolo and Sol Plaatje, whose *Chaka* (1925) and *Mhudi* (1930) are the precursors. The five primary works in this study parody and veer away from the generally accepted traditional African epic heroism and recorded history towards a communal heroic ideal which celebrates the larger community instead of the single epic heroes normally romanticized in African legendary tradition. These novelists, while dismantling the European and African myths about Africa's Golden Age, also disfigure the often

glorified ancient historical landmarks and the fabled heroes of Africa's oral and recorded history.

The rationale behind this investigation is the fact that though these works have innovated, assimilated, and parodied the African oral arts, particularly traditional African epic heroism, no detailed study has been made to explore the literary transformation these texts have undergone as written works. Treating African texts only as appendages of Western literature may undermine the ability of the critical evaluations which go into the heart of these texts and unravel their deeper meanings. The outcome of this kind of approach is that pertinent issues of style and theme originating from negro-African metaphysics, oral traditions, and iconography could thereby be left unexplored. Besides, the bulk of the current body of criticism on African literature, particularly on colonial Africa, tends to concentrate on colonialist Christian values and Western literary production models. One of the overriding concerns of this research, therefore, is to veer away from merely rehashing Eurocentric pronouncements on European influences and literary modes parodied by these works, by taking a fresh look at the texts from the perspective of Afrocentrism and in particular from the point of view of the traditional African oral bards. To this end, therefore, the dissertation is divided into six main chapters and a short concluding chapter:

Chapter 1, *A Survey of Black Representations of Pre-colonial Africa*, functions as an introduction, sketches the European image versus the Black counter-discourse, and locates the study within the current debate on the concept of pre-colonial Africa's Golden Age. Chapter 2, *Thomas Mofolo's "Inverted Epic Hero"*, the nucleus of the study, analyzes the anti-epic and ironic modes manipulated by the text and also maps out the epic generic framework which structures the whole dissertation. Chapter 3, *Traditional African Epic Heroism Revised*, discusses Plaatje's *Mhudi*, paying special attention to the text's deployment of the African epic genre as well as the caricaturist and the anti-heroic modes. In Chapter

4, Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* is examined under the title *A World Trapped in an Orgy of Violence, Barbarism and Servitude*. African oral art is used as the hermeneutic key in unlocking the complexities of Ouologuem's novel. Chapter 5, *The African Anti-Legendary Creative Mythology*, scrutinizes Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, highlighting, among other topics, Armah's daring innovative stylistic experimentation. Chapter 6, entitled *The Akan Iconic Forest of Symbols*, deals with Armah's *The Healers*, concentrating on the Akan iconographic backdrop which shapes and informs this work. And finally, *The Metamorphosis of Traditional African Epic Heroism*, the title of the concluding chapter, sums up this dissertation.

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Chapter 1

A Survey of Black Representations of Pre-colonial Africa: The Collective Black Counter-image of Black Africa

> Upon the throne sat our leader great
> Who ruled the land with wisdom, peace and love,
> According to traditions ancient, pure;
> Old customs, social sanctions, sacred laws
> ...The land was rich with maize, with freshness green!
> Yielding all kind [sic] of food for living things;
> And cornfields, brown their heads, shook golden ripe!
> And trees sang peacefully of sweet content,
> And music-swept the rivers warbled on.
> ...Birds flew and sang beneath skies calm, azure;
> The children laughed and lisped with virgin glee,
> Then came the white man - and a cold wind passed!
> Then spoke the white man - and a dark cloud came!
> Then moved the white man - and a storm then blew!
> Amazed, the people saw - saw all too late!
>
> H.I.E. Dhlomo (1985). *Cetshwayo*.

This background chapter is concerned with investigating the hypothesis that the bulk of Black writing, dating mainly from the colonial period to the present, creates a collective Black counter-image aimed at correcting the distorted colonial portrait of Black Africa. A casual survey of selected works of Black ethnologists, historians, politicians, literary critics and creative writers of Black Africa and the diaspora reveals one major preoccupation: to give back to Black Africa its lost pride and dignity, to reassert the values of African cultures, and to reinterpret Africa's historical landmarks and achievements. Although this survey reviews the old Afrocentric counter-image debate which is led by Cheikh Anta Diop (1960; 1974), Chancellor

Williams (1971), Walter Rodney (1981) and others, this critique will not enter into a debate about whether the views expressed by 'the Black master historians' and other Black writers are 'right' or 'wrong'. What is crucial to this study is not the authenticity of the representations of the Black texts under review, but rather the overwhelming common creative purpose behind writing and publishing them: namely, to celebrate Black Africa, which has been denigrated for centuries by racist literature, and to create a Black counter-culture against these distorted Eurocentric myths.

This research argues that there is a radical African intellectual tradition which glorifies the African Golden Age - a legacy which is now wielded as a counter-image against the Eurocentric image which vilifies the peoples of African origin. A little digression is imperative here: the working definition of 'the African Golden Age'. The majority of Black writers perceive the various historical epochs of the rise of great empires and kingdoms, created by powerful legendary warrior-kings of Africa as irrefutable evidence of Africa's 'Golden Age'. The statesmanship of nation-building exemplified by the creators of these empires is further reinforced by Africa's contribution to world civilization as measured by art findings and multifarious facets of civilization discovered all over Africa. Since the fountainheads of these historical achievements are the 'godlike' traditional rulers, their overt disparagement by the five primary texts as bloodthirsty despots, unfit to be celebrated as Africa's legendary heroes, amounts to denigration of Africa's image. It is postulated that the attempts to create an Afrocentric image, which celebrates Africa's past and challenges the degrading colonial myths of Africa, tend to degenerate into highly romanticized notions of traditional Africa - perceptions which

are often out of tune with historical Africa. The study posits that it is this legendary and idyllic Black image of Africa and its warrior-kings which are queried by the five primary Black texts selected for this research. The primary works are Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* (1925), Sol T. Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1930), Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound To Violence* (1968), Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) and *The Healers* (1978).

This first chapter will examine, chronologically, three distinct facets of the topic. First, the myths which were fabricated by Eurocentric non-creative writers, who vilify pre-European Africa, are reviewed in an attempt to explain the nature and the racist tone of the myths which triggered the Black literary response. Secondly, the collective counter-image created by Black non-creative writers from both Africa and the diaspora against the Eurocentric misrepresentations of traditional Africa will be analyzed. Finally, the hypothesis of this research will be located by outlining the growing trend in African creative writing - an anti-traditional-Africa posture - which openly challenges the collective Black romanticized notions of traditional Africa. The research, however, deliberately excludes the Black creative works which idealize pre-colonial Africa's image and its legendary warrior-kings, because this study is concerned only with the selected African novels which run counter to the Black writer's tendency to perceive pre-colonial Africa as a Golden Age.

The five primary texts - *Chaka*, *Mhudi*, *Bound to Violence*, *Two Thousand Seasons*, and *The Healers* - repudiate the legendary tradition, epitomized by the pre-colonial African warrior-kingship because the supernatural and bombastic legendary tradition is perceived as a legacy of Africa's political culture

of tyranny and servitude. Some of these works extend their indictment of the traditional ruling elite to cover the political leaders of contemporary Africa. To validate the postulation that this is a new direction in African creative writing and that the novels selected for this research form part of a wider trend, a few other works which demonstrate this development will be reviewed later in this chapter.

The distorted portraits of Black Africa and her peoples which are presented by the European philosophers, colonial historians, officers and writers are preoccupied with extolling Western civilization and vilifying African cultural values. Malvern van Wyk Smith's seminal article, '"Waters Flowing from Darkness": The Two Ethiopias in Early European Image of Africa' (1986) shows that the degrading European image of traditional Africa can be traced to ancient times. This article demonstrates that in European myths the image of Black Africa, particularly Africa South of the Sahara, has always been distorted. According to van Wyk Smith, the ancient Greeks, particularly Homer, divided Africa into two Ethiopias. The first Ethiopia was regarded as civilized and comparable to contemporary Europe while the other Ethiopia, comprising sub-Saharan Africa, was said to be populated by 'bestial and treacherous' savages (van Wyk Smith 1986:67). This division of Africa, van Wyk Smith continues, dominated subsequent portrayals of Africa 'from Herodotus in the fifth century BC to as late as the *Nuremburg Chronicle* of 1493'. It is, therefore, not surprising that Herodotus (in Blakeney ed., 1964:iv. 191) describes Black Africans as 'dog-faced creatures, and the creatures without heads, whom the Libyans declare to have their eyes in their breasts; and also wild men, and wild women, and many other far less fabulous beasts'. Diodorus's delineation of 'Dark Africa' and its inhabitants is not any less unflattering,

for his representation asserts that the inhabitants of the 'other Ethiopia' are physically repulsive, 'entirely savage and display the nature of a wild beast'. The Greek philosopher concludes that the Black Africans are devoid of 'human kindness' and 'practices of civilized life' (Diodorus, cited in van Wyk Smith, 1986:68-69).

Van Wyk Smith's earlier article, 'The Origins of Some Victorian Images of Africa' (1979), is a monumental essay which encompasses almost the entire gamut of images of Africa, extending from ancient times to the Victorian period. He quotes William Watreman's *Fardle of Facions* (1555), which depicts the universal depravity of man and contends that man's vileness reached its pinnacle in Africa. Watreman's text declares that Africans 'live the life of beasts' which 'go naked all their life time, and make compte of their wives and children in common' (Watreman, in R.H. Evans 1812, cited in van Wyk Smith, 1979:14). Though the general image projected is a 'dichotomy of paradise and wasteland' (van Wyk Smith, 1979:16), the tendency is to oversimplify, negatively, everything about Africa: '... they became more and more simplified and came to be taken more and more as gospel truth' (van Wyk Smith, 1979:15). The classic illustration of this propensity is the view expressed in the 1714 edition of *Atlas Geographus*:

> The Caffres are a sort of libertines who inhabit from Mozambique to the Cape of Good Hope, live promiscuously without ceremonies, like our Adamites, and wallow in lust and sensuality. ... They live by war and rapine, and feed on the flesh of their enemies and friends, using their skulls for drinking cups ... In short ... they are the most nasty and brutish of all reasonable creatures.
> (1714:39,339, cited in van Wyk Smith, 1979:15)

The most garbled and oversimplified image of the Black African is a stereotyped remark made by an unnamed merchant: 'A negro is

naturally, constitutionally, and habitually sluggish, lazy, thoughtless, ignorant and bigoted' (Robinson and Roberts, 1771:13, cited in van Wyk Smith, 1979:17). This racist image of the Black African is extended to cannibalism, the nadir of human savagery, when Winwood Reade's *The Savage Africa* (cited in Patrick Brantlinger, 1985:184)) argues that the African is, by inherent inclination, a cannibal. Reade asserts that 'the mob of Dahomey are *man-eaters;* they have cannibal minds; they have been accustomed to feed on murder ... A cannibal is not necessarily ferocious. He eats his fellow-creatures, not because he hates them, but because he likes them' (1863:54;136).

Although this warped European image of Black Africa which the Greeks initiated permeates all European culture, it is European philosophers who have emerged as the most powerful influence in propagating the discredited Eurocentric colonial image of Black Africa. The most pervasive fabrication during the Age of Enlightenment is the myth invented for Black Africa by William Bosman in the eighteenth century. Bosman's myth of origins, which he claimed to have culled from West African oral traditions, welds together all the variant elements of the colonial 'noble savage image' of Black Africa. In his *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the Racial Self* (1987) Henry Louis Gates points out that, through this clever ruse, Bosman succeeded in presenting his learned fib as an authentic myth of Africa's genesis. The following is the kernel of the faked myth taken from Bosman's *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (1705). According to Bosman, Blacks are divided into two groups over the identity of the Creator. The majority of Blacks, Bosman claims, 'believe that Man was made by Anasie [Ananse][1] that is, a great Spider' but 'the rest attribute the Creation of Man to God ....' Both Blacks and Whites were, according to the Bosman's myth,

created by God. To the two races, God offered two gifts: 'Gold and knowledge of arts of Reading and Writing, giving the Blacks the first Election, who chose Gold, and left the knowledge of Letters to the White.' The racially-biased purpose behind Bosman's 'mythical fabrication' is unmasked by the coda which closes it: '*God granted their Request, but being incensed at their Avarice, resolved that the Whites should ever be their masters, and they obliged to wait on them as their slaves*' (Bosman, 1705:146 my emphasis)[2]. Gates adds that 'Bosman's fabrication, of cause, was a claim of origins designed to sanction through mythology a political order created by Europeans' (1985:10). Europe's eagerness to use this new weapon was revealed, Gates argues, when David Hume 'gave Bosman's myth the sanction of Enlightenment philosophical reasonings' (1987:17).

Gates points out that 'Hume's comments about blacks were an unacknowledged elaboration upon those made by Bernard Fontenelle ....' In his *Digression On the Ancients and Moderns*, which deals with 'the relation of climate to genius,' Fontenelle pontificates 'that "nature" might have restricted "advancements in knowledge" to the confines of "the Atlas Mountains and the Baltic Sea" and that "it remains to be known ... if one can ever hope to see [either] the great Lapp or Negro authors" (cited in Gates, 1987:17-18).

One of the most elaborate racist philosophical theories on the inherent inferiority of the Black African is presented by David Hume's 'Of National Characters' (1748). In this work the famous philosopher propounds a theory on the link between skin colour, character and intellectual ability. Hume, assuming the airs of the keeper of universal knowledge, asserts that he is 'apt to

suspect the negroes and in general all other species of men ... to be naturally inferior to the whites.' He contends that since he knows of no other civilized race except the whites, and that since there is no technical advancement or acquisition of arts and sciences among any other races, (particularly among Blacks), whites are therefore superior to all other races. The destructive outcome of Hume's racial theory was that his 'opinion became prescriptive' (Gates in Green and Grose eds., 1964:252).

David Hume's racist theory on the 'sub-humanity' of Blacks is further canonized by the famous European philosopher, Immanuel Kant, whose *Observations On the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764) not only endorses Hume's theory on the mental mediocrity of Blacks, but also embellishes it. Kant pushes Hume's theory further by establishing a relation between intellectual capability and skin pigmentation and declares that 'so fundamental is the difference between [the Black and White] races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color' (Gates, 1987:18). Gates's comment on Kant's racial prejudice, that 'Kant posits the correlation of blackness and stupidity as if self-evident' (1987:19), provokes the general rebuttal by Black scholars of the European image of Black Africa.

Another Western philosopher who gilds the European misrepresentations of Africa in European thinking is G.W.F. Hegel. In his *The Philosophy of History* (1956)[3] Hegel charts 'the relation of the African to *culture* and *history*'. As Gates points out 'it is the absence of writing that he [Hegel] takes to be the most salient indication that Africa is the land of ultimate difference.' Hegel declares that as far as history is concerned 'Africa ... has remained ... shut up' and 'enveloped

in the dark mantle of Night'. Africa, according to Hegel, 'is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit'. Hegel finally dismisses Africa as 'the Unhistorical, Underdeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature'. Hegel is so convinced of the infallibility of his philosophical theory of Black Africans' inherent mental mediocrity that he recommends that slavery must only be gradually abolished because it is the only institution which could civilize and save Black Africans from timeless cultural and 'historical darkness'.

The 'culturelesssness' and 'historylessness' of Africa presented by Hegel became a prescription for Europeans and the most devastating political weapon used in colonising and enslaving Africa. The intellectual absurdity of these philosophical giants of Western civilization is so enormous that one wonders how racial intolerance and genius could live so closely together. The racial bigotry of the great Western philosophers like Hume, Kant and Hegel puzzles most Black intellectuals, who put it down to the philosophers' innate racism, which is further compounded by their knowledge of centuries of Arab and European enslavement of Black Africans. This riddle is ironically unravelled by the German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer. In his *Essays and Aphorisms* (1970), Schopenhauer, the iconoclast, demystifies the paradox and eloquently asserts that '... in the realm of the intellect, weakness and absurdity cleave so firmly to human nature that even the most brilliant mind is not always entirely free of them: whence the mighty errors which can be pointed to even in the works of the greatest men...' (1970:223).

Thomas Jefferson, the American statesman and intellectual, has also emerged as another white genius seduced by racial blindness.

A comment in Basil Davidson's *Black Mother: Africa and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (1961) on Jefferson's racial obsession unmasks the racial flaw in the American politician's vision. Davidson poses a crucial question: 'How otherwise would so intelligent a man as Thomas Jefferson ...' who 'was writing after more than a century of intensive slaving had passed by ... have reached the conclusion that he did?' (Davidson, 1961:25):

> "Comparing them [Negroes in North America] by their faculties of memory, reason and imagination, it appears to me that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous."
>
> (Jefferson, cited in Davidson, 1961:25)

Davidson then provides the answer to his own question: most of the European myths and dogma about the innate inferiority of Black Africans were fabricated on the decks of slave ships in order to justify slavery. Though slavery was abolished, the old habits and the brain-washing which keep the myths alive survive to this day. The European myths of the alleged mental retardation of Blacks thus constitutes a historical continuum which stretches from the Ancient Greeks to the present times.

Outside Europe, one of the illuminating illustrations of the warped colonial image of Africa is a remark made by an American racial theoretician, Lothrop Stoddard, in his *The Rising Tide of Color* (1920). Stoddard claims that the colonized Blacks in Africa, unlike the colonized Asians, have 'no historic pasts' or cultural heritage to lose as a result of European colonisation. He arrogantly asserts that 'black peoples have no historic pasts', no 'civilizations of their own' and 'are practically devoid of that accumulated mass of beliefs, thoughts, and

experiences which render Asiatics so impenetrable and so hostile to white influence' (Stoddard, 1920:91). Stoddard's racist view endorses the theory of Africa's 'historylessness' and 'culturelessness' propounded by Kant, Hume and Hegel.

Similar racially supremacist views were expressed by European scholars, colonial historians, officers and recorders. In his book, *The Dual Mandate in Tropical Africa* (1920), Lord Lugard (cited in W.F. Feuser, 1984:54), the first governor-general of Nigeria, asserts that 'We hold these countries because it is the genius of our race to colonise, to trade, and to govern'. The same racist narrow-mindedness which reduces Blacks to the lowest level on the great chain of human beings was echoed by Mitchell, who was the colonial governor of Kenya in 1954. In his essay, 'Africa and the West in Historical Perspective', Mitchell declares that:

> The spade of the archaeologist might unearth the skeleton of primitive man a million years old, or stone implements alleged to date from 30,000 years back, but after that - nothing: nothing at all before the rubbish dumps of modern colonial towns.
>
> (Mitchell, in Haines ed., 1955:12)

What is sublimely ironical about Mitchell's intended disfigurement of the romanticized Black image of pre-colonial Africa is his own unwitting admission of the emptiness of British pretensions about their civilizing mission in Africa. By Mitchell's own admission, what replaced the pre-colonial African huts are 'the rubbish dumps of modern colonial towns'. Besides this ironic inversion of Mitchell's intended virulent satiric trope, there is the fact that his racial slur on traditional Africa reveals something else: his own failure as 'an emissary of light' charged with bringing progress and civilization to the 'Dark continent' and his administrative ineptitude as a British

colonial governor who had only succeeded in creating 'the rubbish dumps of modern colonial times'.

These distortions of pre-colonial Africa are easy to deal with. How to deal with what Feuser (1984:54) calls 'arrogance and historical Darwinism' in the postcolonial and post-independence period is much more difficult. The notorious disparagement of African history by the Oxford Professor of History, Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, in his work, *The Rise of Christian Europe* (1965), warrants citation. Trevor-Roper scornfully dismisses African history as 'the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe' and asserts that:

> ... there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America. And darkness is not a subject for history....
>
> (Trevor-Roper, 1965:9)

Perhaps Feuser's invective in response to this kind of intellectual poverty induced by racist narcissism cannot be helped. In his 'Reflections of history in African literature' (1984) Feuser retorts that 'We may call this magnificent piece of arrogance and historical Darwinism, an expression of master complex, not restricted to the nineteenth-century German *Herrenvolk idea*, in which subject peoples are morally, economically and politically supine' (1984:54).

Most Eurocentric critics complain about the Black writers' pathological obsession with the past without realizing that the entire 'dark' continent is psychologically trapped within the period of Euro-Arab conquest, colonization, and enslavement. All sensitive Blacks, I believe, are plagued by an uncontrollable inner urge to prove to the world that they are neither

intellectually nor culturally barren and primitive as colonial myths make them out to be. Two of the most articulate Black literary critics who have meticulously explored the Eurocentric image of peoples of Black African origins are Kofi Awoonor and Henry Louis Gates. Awoonor's rebuttal of the European 'noble savage image' of Africa in his *The Breast of the Earth* (1976) is similar to Gates's in his *Figures in Black* (1987). Reacting to the European philosophical claims that Africa is a 'cultureless' and 'historyless' continent, Awoonor sanctions the views of other Black intellectuals:

> It has once been asked whether Africa had a history. *The question revealed not only bigotry but also a very simple-minded type of racist scholarship.* History does not exist only in "written" records and books, but in such non-documentary sources as oral traditions, the findings of archaeology, of musicology and ethnology of the planet earth.
>
> (Awoonor, 1976:3-4, my emphasis)

Both Awoonor (1976) and Gates (1987) contend that the racist strictures of Hume, Kant, Hegel, and others, triggered a collective angry riposte from Black writers. Thus the literary war which was initiated about 400 years ago by displaced Black slaves in the kingdoms of Spain and Portugal and 150 years ago in the United States is still being fought. The only difference is that the battlefield has changed slightly. Eurocentric criticism of Black texts has become the dominant battleground.

Awoonor's other observation underscores the Black literary reaction general to the distorted European image of pre-colonial Africa. He intimates that Black intellectuals do not treat the idea of the Golden Age of pre-colonial Africa as a mythical notion but as a historical reality by locating this era within the African historical continuum:

> The kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, Songhai, and Kanem-Bornu were followed by the successive states of Hausa, Oyo, Benin, Denkyira, and others in western Africa. *The period from A.D. 300 to 1600 is normally regarded as the African golden age, underscored by a process of independent growth and selective borrowing.* These developments of the western part of the continent were repeated in the eastern, central, and southern sections at later dates with the great civilizations of the Congo, Monomotapa, the hybrid culture of Swahili, and in the rise and fall of Shaka's Zulu kingdom and its fiercely proud military tradition that was finally subjugated in 1879 with the defeat of the truly last Zulu king, Cetewayo [Cetshwayo], by the British.
> (Awoonor, 1976:7, my emphasis)

This is one of the most unequivocal attempts to negate the European image of Black Africa, to carve a positive counter-image for the 'dark continent' and to restore a sense of pride in African traditions. Awoonor's comment also confirms the collective views of the Black writers who will be scrutinized later in this chapter.

In *Figures in Black*, Gates declares that since '1573, when "el negro" Juan Latino published his first three books of neo-Latin verse ...' (1987:xxxii), Black writers have been trying to dismantle the distorted European representations of Africa by creating a collective Afrocentric image of Africa and trying to prove that peoples of African descent are not sub-human, but members of the 'Great Chain of Human Beings'. In his 'Writing "Race" and the Difference It Makes' (1985), Gates reviews the metamorphosis of the pervasive European image of Blacks two hundred and twelve years after the publication of Juan Latino's works which constitutes the first step towards the reclamation of Africa's lost pride and dignity:

> Since the beginning of the seventeenth century, Europeans had wondered aloud whether or not the African "species of men" as they most commonly put it, *could* create formal literature, could ever master "the arts and the sciences".

> If they could, the argument ran, then the African variety of humanity and the European variety were fundamentally related. If not, then it seemed clear that the African was destined by nature to be *a slave*.
>
> ... The urge toward systematization of all human knowledge ... led directly to the relegation of black people to a lower place in the great chain of being, an ancient construct that arranged all of creation on a vertical scale from plants, insects, and animals through man to the angels and God himself.
>
> By 1750, the chain had become minutely calibrated; the human scale rose from: "lowliest Hottentot" (black South Africans) to "glorious Milton and Newton."
>
> (Gates, 1985:8)

Gates remarks that the European tradition of using the African's ability to create the arts and the sciences as a yardstick for assessing Black humanity has turned literacy into 'both a technology and a commodity' (Gates 1987:11) for classifying the African. He affirms this notion when he points out that 'While it might sound hyperbolic to state this today, enlightened antislavery advocates turned to writing to determine and to demonstrate in the most public way just how far removed from the ape the African was in fact' (1987:11). Gates's commentary also reveals his artistic purpose and confirms the view that the task of constructing Africa's new self-identity, aimed at nullifying the European misrepresentations of Africa, is also the major aim of modern Black literary critics - African, Caribbean and African Americans - who reject the European image of the peoples of Black African origin.

Gates's insight highlights the core of European misrepresentations of Black Africa and why literary production becomes the instrument of the collective Black response to the colonial myths which vilify Africa. In his *Figures in Black*

(1987) Gates asserts that the Eurocentric notion, that what makes man is his ability to create the arts, goes back to the Renaissance era and cites Sir Francis Bacon's comment of 1620 in *The New Organon*. Bacon declares that man's standard of civilization does not depend upon the 'soil', the 'climate' or the 'race' he comes from, but upon 'the arts' (1987:15). Gates links Bacon's view to the subsequent development of the racist discourse enshrined in Western philosophy. He reveals that 'Eleven years later, Peter Heylyn, in his *Little Description of the Great World*, used Bacon's information to relegate Blacks to a subhuman status: 'The black African, he wrote, lacked completely "the use of Reason which is peculiar unto man; [he is] of little Wit; and destitute of all arts and sciences; prone to luxury, and for the greatest part Idolators"' (1987:15). Although Gates's major concern in *Figures in Black* (1987) appears to be the Eurocentric racist criticism of Black texts, the declaration of intent - 'Let us examine briefly four instances of blacks whose literacy would serve as an argument against the bestial status of all black people' (1987:11) - which opens his critique, seems to mount a counter discourse against the Eurocentric mythology which denigrates the collective Black image. This perception is endorsed by the fact that the Black intellectuals celebrated by Gates include three displaced slaves and a free African who lived in Europe and not in the USA. They are Wilhelm Amo of the Gold Coast; Job Ben Solomon of the Guinea Coast, 'the son of Solomon (Suleiman)', a Fulani priest; "el negro Juan Latino"; and Jacobus Capiten (1987:12-13). Textual evidence from Gates's article (1985) and work (1987) appears to indicate that he is, like the other Black writers under discussion, engaged in the rehabilitation of the 'noble savage' image of Africa and the diaspora, however obliquely.

This interpretation is further endorsed by Gates's experience at Cambridge University. That one of the most brilliant African Americans should feel the same pathological urge to prove that he and his ancestors are members of the human race, and that he is not intellectually inferior, confirms the power and the pervasiveness of the distorted European image of the Black people. Gates's reaction to finding himself the only Black post-graduate student of English at Cambridge University, and his obsessive inner urge to prove that Blacks are not intellectually inferior as European myths have portrayed them, is the standard Black reaction against the racially-coloured image of Blacks. 'I felt', Gates writes, 'as if I were embarked upon a mission for all black people ...' (1987:xvi).

It is important to note that Africa's rejection of the Europeans' prejudices against Africa has a long history going back more than ten centuries. A record of the progress of this Black response is pertinent as a background to the dominant Black views already outlined. By subjecting the writings of selected Black ethnologists, historians and politicians to a critical scrutiny we can isolate and explore the dominant Black image they present of traditional Africa. The idealization of pre-colonial Africa and its heroes was initiated in non-fictional writings by Black writers in response to the distorted colonial image of Black Africa and the peoples of African descent. The earliest call to create a composite Black image to neutralize the Eurocentric colonial portraiture of Africa took the form of celebrating Black intellectuals who had achieved academic fame.

The first known African writer to be celebrated by Black writers in their attempt to create a Black counter-culture against the warped European image of Africa is Antar, an Afro-Arab born of

an African mother (Awoonor, 1976:146). Antar shares the rostrum of legendary heroes with Shaka in Condetto Nenekhaly-Camara's *Continent-Afrique* (1970) (cited in Donald Burness, 1976:81). Drawing on Janheinz Jahn's *A History of Neo-African Literature* (1966), Awoonor reports that Antar, 'who died in 615 [AD]', published poetry called "Antar Romance" (cited in Awoonor, 1976:146). Antar's poetry, Awoonor concludes, was described by the English critic Cedric Dover 'as the *first classical work concerned with color prejudice.*' Thus the Black writers' condemnation of European racial bigotry, which relegates Blacks to the lowest level on the great chain of human beings, is initiated by Antar.

The Black literary revolt set in motion by Antar was then taken over by a group of displaced slaves who lived in the kingdoms of Spain and Portugal. According to Awoonor, the most prominent of these was Juan Latino. We are told that Latino, who was educated together with his mistress's son, the Duke of Sessa, became highly proficient in Greek and Latin. In 1546, when he obtained a BA degree from the University of Granada, 'he was already an accomplished Latin scholar, lutist [sic], guitarist and wit' (Awoonor, 1976:147). Awoonor discounts the European claim of the Black African's inborn intellectual mediocrity by recording how Latino demonstrated his superb inherent intellect by becoming a professor at the University of Granada in 1757. Latino's pride in his African origin is revealed by his open proclamation: 'hic scriptor nec fuit orbe satus, Aethiopum terris venit' ('this author was not born in the region, he came from the land of the Ethiopians') (Jahn, 1966:31). His contribution towards the growth of the Black counter-image is conveyed by the sardonic humour and anti-imperial stance of his verse on the colour prejudice of the period:

> If our black face, O King, seems to your ministers odious,
> Ethiops find your white faces no more to their taste.
> (Latino, cited in Jahn, 1966:32)

This tone of mockery not only reveals the author's latent anger, but also proves that Black reactions towards the disparaging European image of Africa have been very consistent for more than two centuries. One of the earliest Black African works to redress the European image of pre-European Africa is James Africanus Horton's *West African Countries and People...and A Vindication of the African Race* (1868, cited in Claude Wauthier, 1978:100-101). Horton, a freed slave and a Sierra Leonean, attacks the persistent European dogma on the inherent inferiority of Black Africans and discounts the European image of Africa by paying tribute to the earliest educated Blacks.

In *Memoirs of West African Celebrities* (1905, cited in Claude Wauthier, 1978:100), S.R.B. Attoh-Ahumah dismisses the European misrepresentations which maintain that the Black race is by nature morally and intellectually inferior. He then lists those he considered to be the educated celebrities of West Africa at his time, citing Ottobah Cuguano of Ajumako, the Gold Coast (Ghana), Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) of Essaka, Nigeria and Wilhelm Amo of the Gold Coast (Ghana).

In his *The Mind of Africa*, William E. Abraham, the Ghanaian philosopher, also deals, at great length, with the dogma of African intellectual frailty which is canonized in Western literature. Abraham writes:

> The period of slavery threw up a number of notable Africans in Europe and America. Records of some of them have survived. Of the European ones, one may mention Attobah Coguano, Ignatius Sancho, Gustavus Vassa [Olaudah Equiano of Nigeria], and Anton Wilhelm Amo.
> (Abraham, 1962:126)

In his portrayal of Attobah Coguano, Abraham draws the reader's attention to his intellectual ability by alluding to 'his autobiography, which was published in English and translated into French'. The work depicts how Coguano and his fellow slaves, imprisoned in the murky entrails of the slave ship, 'heard nothing but the clanging of chains, the sound of the ship, the cries of fellow prisoners'. The demonic cruelty of the slave trader is evoked when Coguano recalls their invocation of 'Heaven and tear-baths "calculated to move the hearts of monsters, does not that of human life ....' (cited in Abraham, 1962:126).

'Gustavus Vassa', Abraham tells us, 'was born Olaudoh Equiano to a vassal of the King of Benin in Nigeria'. The first stage of his Middle Passage took him to Virginia before he was finally bought by 'a Captain M.H. Pascal, who brought him over to England, bestowed the name Vassa on him, and deposited him in Guernsey' (1962:127). He was devoted to his adopted country and took part in expedition against Louisbourg under Admiral Boschaven in 1758' and became a Christian in 1759 (1962:128). Though he became a priest in Cape Coast Castle in Ghana, an attempt to have him ordained was rejected by the Bishop of London in 1779. Instead he received 'a Royal Commission as Commissary for Provisions and Stores for the Black Poor of Sierra Leone' in 1778. Abraham seals Olaudah Equiano's journey of social upliftment by declaring that 'he was mentioned in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for August 1792 and in the *Literary and Biographical Magazine* for May 1792' (1962:128). That Equiano was a literary figure is exemplified by the fact that he is author of *Equiano's Travels: His Autobiography* (1789), which engraves his name on the universal literary gallery.

The next African intellectual mentioned in the Black counter-image discourse is Wilhelm Amo. Amo, who is celebrated in Abraham's, Gates's and Awoonor's works, obtained a Ph.D. degree from the University of Wittenberg. According to Abraham, Amo, who was born about 1770, 'was sent to Holland through the instrumentality of Johannes van der Star, a preacher in the Gold Coast, to study more of the Christian principles, free from the seductions of his heathen compatriots, in order to come back as a priest and teacher' (1962:128). Amo entered the University of Halle, 'and in 1729 publicly defended his dissertation, *De Jure Maurorum in Europa,* a rather patriotic, if racialistic subject'. Abraham's self-conscious attempt to give back the lost pride and dignity to the African, enslaved and mentally and culturally bastardized by imperialist domination is conveyed thus:

> Amo was attempting to minimise relevant differences between the African civilization and the Christian, which Christians used as a justification for slavery. He moved on to Wittenberg and, while Kant was still a boy, became a Master of Philosophy there. In 1734, he defended a work in which he argued that sensation was not a mental faculty. Some of his conclusions were startling for his time. He held that if ideas of perception were in the mind at all, they could only be there by way of mode, because of the way in which empiricists conceived ideas ... Amo was a rationalist philosopher after Leibnitz, whom as a boy he had met at the Duke of Brunswick's. His performance was greatly praised. And the Chairman and Faculty members described him as a most noble and most renowned man from Africa, extraordinarily honest, diligent, and so erudite that he stood above his mates. In 1738, he produced his *magnum opus*, a book on logic, theory of knowledge and metaphysics ... In 1739 he moved to Jena, where he taught. In all, therefore, Amo taught at the Universities of Wittenberg, Halle and Jena ... He knew Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Dutch, French and German. If he had taken the trouble to learn English more about him would be known today. His success in Germany was probably symbolised in his nomination as a Chancellor of the Court of Berlin. He returned to Ghana sometime after 1743 and died of boredom.
> (Abraham, 1962:129-130)

Amo's intellectual fame as exemplified by his academic publications and positions held in three European universities is confirmed by his appointment as the Chancellor of the Court of Berlin. Gates, self-consciously, confirms Amo's intellectual brilliance by inscribing the first chapter of his *Figures in Black* (1987:12) with an epigram taken from Amo's *Treatise on the Art of Philosophising Soberly and Accurately* (1738).

The struggle to negate the discredited colonial image of Africa and to create a new positive image for Black Africa is then taken over by one of the greatest figures of African nationalism: J.E. Casely-Hayford of the Gold Coast (Ghana), whose work *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911, cited in Wauthier, 1978:102) reviews Africa's contribution to world civilizations and asserts that Africa was 'the cradle of the world's systems and philosophies, and the nursing mother of its religions.' Casely-Hayford's work dismisses the European view that pre-European Africa was a cultural, religious and intellectual desert, and contends that rather the reverse was true. His Afrocentric discourse prepared the way for others like Anta Diop, Chancellor Williams and Walter Rodney.

This collective effort to create a new identity for Africa is not confined only to Black historians and ethnographers. African political leaders have also contributed towards forging a dignified Afrocentric image for Africa. Nnamdi Azikiwe, who was the first President of Nigeria, re-creates Black Africa's ancient glory and rejects Europe's disparaging view of Africa. Azikiwe's *Renascent Africa* (1968), first published in 1937, strives to give back to Africa its past splendour and pride by painting its glorious past. Azikiwe rehabilitates the discredited colonial image of Black Africa by listing facets of civilization he claims Africa was the first to develop. His list includes the discovery

of iron and its refinery and 'the concept of one Supreme God' - a view echoed by Chancellor Williams (1971:35-36) and Sigmund Freud in his *Moses and Monotheism*, whose thesis argues that Moses, the propagator of 'the concept of one Supreme God', was a negro-Egyptian and not a Jew (cited in Joseph Campbell, 1964/1976:125-140). The Nigerian politician also contends that 'while Europe slumbered during the "dark ages", a great civilization flourished on the banks of the Niger, extending from the salt mines of Therghaza in Morocco to Lake Tchad' and that 'while Oxford and Cambridge were in their inchoate stages, the University of Sankore, in Timbuctoo, welcomed 'scholars and learned men from all over the moslem world' (Azikiwe, 1968:9). Azikiwe's homage to pre-colonial Africa confirms Horton's, Attoh-Ahumah's, and Casely-Hayford's exaltation of ancient Africa.

The deification of African intellectuals, heroes and warrior-chiefs also emerges as the central concern of Francophone African writings. In his *L'Empire de Rabeh* (1950), Arab Djama Babikir paints a romanticized portrait of the chief of Chad who was vanquished by the French in 1904. Babikir portrays chief Rabeh as a legendary hero, a moralist and a strict reformer who 'will rank among the most illustrious leaders' (Babikir, 1950:70) of Africa. It is interesting to note that the French official portrait of Rabeh inverts Babikir's picture of reverence. 'This petty chieftain Rabeh', one French Officer declares, '... is a common slave trafficker ...' (Babikir, 1950:80)[4]. The conflicting African and European images of Rabeh reveal the prevailing situation: the clash between the European and Black African views of traditional Africa and her chiefs.

The veneration for traditional Africa in Francophone African writings is the thematic concern of Fily Dabo Sissoko's *Les Noirs*

et la Culture (1950), which paints a glossy picture of a Tukolor from Futa Toro, al-Hajj Umar:

> I should go so far as to say that al-Hajj Umar, like Hannibal, was a giant among men. Like Hannibal he possessed to a supreme degree a will of iron, unshakeably set on a specific goal: the propagation of a religious doctrine [tidjanism] and the founding of a state to this end.
> (Sissoko, 1950:40)

There is an unambiguous tone of romanticization in Sissoko's portrayal of al-Hajj Umar as exemplified by this short extract - a celebration of traditional Africa which echoes that of the works so far surveyed.

Abdoulaye Wade further extends the theme of hero-worshipping from pre-colonial to post-independence Africa. Wade's *Afrique Noir et Union Fracaise* (1953, cited in Wauthier, 1978:95) presents not only the chiefs as military strategists and patriots but also as political visionaries whose attempts to unify Africa were thwarted by European invasion and colonisation. This sensibility echoes the predominant Black African view of the careers of Black Africa's legendary warrior-leaders like Nana Agyeman Prempeh I of Ashanti, the Kings of Dahomey, Queen Anna Nzinga of Matamba (Angola), King Mzilikazi of the Matabeles and Emperor Shaka of the Zulus (Williams, 1971:276; Rodney, 1972:80) - the legendary tradition which is shattered by the primary texts.

A year after the publication of Wade's work, the first comprehensive celebration of ancient Africa was undertaken by J.E. De Graft-Johnson of the Gold Coast (Ghana). De Graft-Johnson's purpose in reconstructing the history of pre-colonial Africa is revealed by his title - *African Glory: The Story of Vanished Negro Civilizations* (1954). He adopts a Pan Africanist approach to his re-interpretation of African history, reviewing

the African empires of the past and redefining the historical landmarks of African civilization. These empires and kingdoms include Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Congo, Monomotapa, amaZulu, Ancient Ethiopia and Egypt. Claude Wauthier (1978) appraises De Graft-Johnson's work and unmasks how the nationalist historian attempts to reverse the European image of Africa by painting in glowing terms 'the riches of the empire of Ghana, the splendours of the great Kankan Musa and his astonishing pilgrimage to Mecca, the importance of the university of Timbuktu and the fame of its scholars, the exploits of the great conquerors such as Sundiata and Askia the Great' (De Graft-Johnson 1954: 117-118). The Mali Emperor, Kankan (Mansa) Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca, which is celebrated by De Graft-Johnson as a historical landmark is contemptuously dismissed by Armah in his *Two Thousand Seasons* (1979a) as the journey of 'a moron'.

The nationalist leaders of Africa and the freedom activists of the Black diaspora have also contributed to the creation of the collective Black image of Black Africa. One of the greatest political figures of Black nationalism was Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. In his *The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah* (1957), he pays tribute to the chiefs who led their people in 'valiant wars against the British' penetration and subjugation of the Gold Coast. Topping the list of the legendary heroes of Ghana, was Nana Agyeman Prempeh I of Asante, who was banished to the Seychelles Islands for resisting the British take-over of the Asante Empire (Nkrumah, 1957:199). The legendary Asantehenes, Nana Agyeman Prempeh I included, it is essential to note, are scornfully dismissed in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Healers* as selfish and bloodthirsty tyrants who wallowed in human sacrifice and sold the non-Asante Akans into slavery.

Nkrumah's exaltation of the image of Africa and her warrior-chiefs is not restricted to the colonial period. Claude Wauthier's citation of Nkrumah's motion for independence reveals the larger dimension of Nkrumah's attempt to take apart the colonial misrepresentations of pre-colonial Africa. In the motion presented to the Gold Coast Legislative Assembly in 1953, Nkrumah re-creates the past grandeur of ancient Ghana as follows:

> In the very early days of the Christian era, long before England had assumed any importance, long even before her people had united into a nation, our ancestors had attained a great empire which lasted until the eleventh century, ... At its height that empire stretched from Timbuctoo to Bamako, and even as far as to the Atlantic. It is said that lawyers and scholars were much respected in that empire and that the inhabitants of Ghana wore garments of wool, cotton, silk and velvet. There was trade in copper, gold and textile fabrics, and jewels and weapons of gold and silver were carried. Thus may we take pride in the name of Ghana, not out of romanticism, but as an inspiration for the future.
>
> (Nkrumah, cited in Wauthier, 1978:102)

The greatest Southern African historical personage who has generated a huge number of legends and myths is Shaka. Although the Zimbabwean political leader, Ndabaningi Sithole's central concern in his *African Nationalism* (1962) is the development of nationalism in Africa, the author finds it necessary to allude to Shaka's military genius and statesmanship:

> In Zululand, for instance, there arose at the beginning of the last century a black military genius by name of Shaka. Sometimes this African military genius has been called the "Black Napoleon of South Africa". He conquered many small tribes and made them into one Zulu nation.
>
> (Sithole, 1962:78)

Sithole's tone of reverence is consonant with the collective romanticized Black image of Shaka. The Zulu legendary hero also appears in Albert Luthuli's *Let My People Go* (1963), which

emerges from the survey of selected African works as the only African political text that not only praises Shaka for his heroic exploits but also alludes faintly to views that might vilify him:

> His outlook was that of his day, and when that is taken into account, and when all that can be said to his discredit has been said, this king of legendary physique emerges as a brilliant general, and a ruler of great courage, intelligence, and ability. Without the moral support of any precedent, he had the strength to withstand (and on occasion to expose) the power exerted over his people by wizards. His reorganisation of his army was enough to make it in his time the mightiest military force in Africa.
>
> (Luthuli, 1962:17)[5]

Luthuli's qualified exaltation of Shaka is a departure from the general trend: the unequivocal idolization of Shaka and what he stood for.

One of the most illustrious African American freedom activists, the celebrated martyr, Malcolm X, in his *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), also attempts to reclaim Black Africa's image from the thick forest of European misrepresentations. Malcolm X attempts to restore the lost pride and dignity of his aboriginal home, Black Africa, by asserting that archaeological excavations have revealed that African 'History has been "whitened" by the white man ....' Malcolm X further contends that art findings now being discovered 'on the Black Continent, Africa ... are proving over and over again, how the black man had great, fine, sensitive civilizations before the white man was out of the caves' (1965:176).

In *L'Afrique Noire Pre-coloniale* (1960) Diop reviews the civilizations of the Sudanese empires of Ghana, Mali, Songhai and

Kanem-Bornu. Diop confirms the views of the writers already analyzed and asserts that for many centuries while these African empires were enjoying a high level of civilized life, Europe was wallowing in the 'Dark Ages'. Diop's second work, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (1974), which undertakes the monumental task of substantiating the postulation that Ancient Egyptian civilization was created by Black Africans and not by Asiatics and Europeans from the Mediterranean as Eurocentric historians have contended. In what might be considered as a brilliant inversion of the European claim to racial supremacy, Diop cites Champollion the Younger's[6] analysis of Egyptian legends found on the tomb of Pharaoh Sesostris (16th century B.C.). 'This monument...', which Diop describes as 'the oldest complete ethnological document available' (Diop, 1974:46), subjects the white race to a status-reversal. The legends intimate that the white race, which claims to be superior to all other races was, ironically, in ancient times, at the lowest level of the often taunted great chain of human beings. In the order of world civilizations, the legends placed the Ancient Egyptians at the zenith of the chain of universal growth and refinement.

It could be argued that Diop's work re-orders African history from prehistoric times to modern times, divesting it of all the degrading myths of Africa and asserting that Ancient Egyptian civilization was a Black civilization. From this premise Diop concludes that the original Ancient Egyptians who first inhabited the Nile Valley before the Arab and European invasions of Ancient Egypt were Blacks and that Black Africa was, therefore, the cradle of the world's civilizations.

Chancellor Williams' work sanctions Diop's arguments. Using the same premise, Williams, an African American, sets out in his mammoth historical work, *The Destruction of Black Civilization* (1971), researched for sixteen years, to restructure the history of Africa from 4500 B.C. to the colonial period. Williams's central aim, like Diop, Casely-Hayford and De Graft-Johnson, is to restore Africa's lost dignity by proving that the Ancient Egyptian civilization, regarded as the source of the world's civilizations, was built by Blacks. In a chapter called 'The Preview' Williams establishes the theoretical framework of his thesis and two of his statements unravel his major concern:

> That the Blacks were among the very earliest builders of a great civilization on this planet, including the development of writing, sciences, engineering, medicine, architecture, religion and the fine arts;
>
> That Africa was the cradle of a religious civilization based on the conception of one Supreme God, Creator of the Universe; and that this belief in one Supreme Being ante-dated that of the Jews by several thousand years before Abraham and that the role of the numerous sub-deities on whom Western writers dwell, was exactly the same as that of patron saints in the Christian world....
>
> (Williams, 1971:35-36)

The historical portrait of pre-colonial Africa mounted by Williams's text stretches over sixty centuries and is one of the most comprehensive historical works on African history. Williams's historical canvas stretches spatially and temporally all the way down from Ancient Egypt to the Cape. The vast period covered ranges from the pre-dynastic era of about 4500 B.C. to about 1700 A.D. (Williams, 1971:101). Williams mounts his dismantling of the colonial image of Africa by giving a detailed account of the fame achieved by the Sudanese University of Sankore (Williams, 1971:208-219). Williams's view on the

intellectual and literary culture of Ancient Africa corroborates that of De Graft-Johnson (1954:118), and Azikiwe (1968:9), who also celebrate the academic glory of the ancient Sudanese University of Sankore (Timbuktu). The work also extols the rise of the Central African Kingdoms of Kuba and Congo, and depicts their fall. Queen Anna Nzinga of Matamba (1580-1663), who successfully defended Angola from the Portuguese take-over for fifty years, receives the greatest tribute in this region. Williams reveals that '... although the conquest of Angola was ordered by Lisbon in 1571 and began in 1575, the Portuguese, to their greatest surprise, had to fight their longest and bloodiest war, almost foot by foot, before Angola was finally taken nearly a half century later.' The Portuguese, we are told, '... had not counted on being confronted with a Black queen who would turn out to be one of the bravest generals that ever commanded an army. They had not counted on the new Queen of Ndongo, Anna Nzinga' (Williams, 1971:276).

The most lucid Afrocentric thesis which neutralizes the Eurocentric misrepresentations of Africa was formulated by a symposium, 'The Peopling of Ancient Egypt and The Deciphering of Meroitic Script' (1974), organized by the International Scientific Committee for The Drafting of a General History of Africa (UNESCO) and held in Cairo. The ideological-cum-critical purpose of this symposium reveals the dominant attitude of Black intellectuals towards Eurocentric denigration of Africa:

> Eighteenth century scientists embarked on the study of human subspecies in order to prove the superiority of the white race and it is no accident that, as their modern disciples come to the startling realization that the human family was born in Africa, that the first homo sapiens were probably Black and that Caucasians probably sprang from prehistoric Black people as a genetic mutation to albinism, these scientists are eager to suppress this information. Finally, as long as the world is dominated by White people,

> as long as those White scientists--who now claim that there is no validity to the study of race--continue to practice racism socially and academically; and, most important, as long as the Black race bears the universal badge of inferiority forced on it by scientists who have distorted or suppressed Black history, we shall not only include race as an integral part of our historical writings, but we shall prominently focus on it whenever and wherever the truth can be told until sincere men of science return the Black race to its former position of respect and reverence on earth.
>
> (The Symposium on Drafting of a General History of Africa, 1974:3)

The Black intellectual attempt to create a counter-image against the European distortion of Africa is now firmly entrenched in African-American historical writings. This view is endorsed by publications like *Nile Valley Civilizations* (1985) and *Journal of African Civilizations,* which are all edited by Ivan Van Sertima. This treatise is further confirmed by Legrand H. Clegg II, who argues in his essay, 'Black Rulers of the Golden Age' (in Van Sertima, 1985), that:

> One view, which was introduced by Nineteenth Century Egyptologists and has dominated Western scientific thinking ever since, is that 'the people who lived in Ancient Egypt were "white", even though their pigmentation was dark, or even black, as early as the predynastic period. Negroes made their appearance only from the XVIIIth Dynasty onwards'. Little evidence has ever been presented in support of this position, but it has survived largely, if not entirely, on the strength of the reputation, power and influence of the scientists and scholars who espouse it. The opposing view, which holds that 'ancient Egypt was peopled, "from its neolithic infancy to the end of the native dynasties", by Black Africans', appears to have been the only opinion on the subject from the time of the ancient Hebrews and Greeks until the birth of the science of Egyptology in Europe over a century ago.
>
> (Van Sertima ed., 1985:47)

The Afrocentric view that Africa was the cradle of the world's civilizations is now a major academic subject which is vigorously researched by modern Black intellectuals. The most powerful evidence which validates this hypothesis is provided by the recently published work, George B.N. Ayittey's *Africa Betrayed* (1992). Ayittey echoes the views of the Black writers already reviewed. He writes:

> Even when Charles Darwin speculated that it was Africa, not a Garden of Eden in the Near or Far East, whence the evolution of the human race should be traced, intellectual prejudices of the time precipitate a spirited rejection of the notion that something good or new could originate from Africa. Allegedly, its people had no history, no culture, no civilization, and nothing of value to contribute to the creation of the human being.
>
> It is now firmly established, however, that the earliest evidence of culture in the world is found in Africa. In 1931, Louis Leakey of Kenya discovered the fossilized remains of the creature *Proconsul*, identified by scientists as one of the primates in man's evolutionary scale, which lived 25 millions years ago ....
>
> It was also in Africa that toolmaking first appeared in the geological record. The first tools mostly made from stone, are known as Oldowan-type tools after the Olduvai Gorge. They were used as early as 2 million years ago and had been discovered at various sites throughout Africa.
>
> The evidence is indisputable. Yet these remarkable discoveries were generally dismissed as irrelevant ... The human race and its culture evolved in Africa. Yet after migrating to other continents and perfecting their skills, humanoids returned with a vengeance - to denigrate, enslave, conquer and colonize.
>
> The first to attack were the Arabs ... Next to come were the European explorers, Christian missionaries, and slave traders ...
>
> (Ayittey, 1992:3-4)

In perfect accord with the radical Black intellectual tradition, Ayittey argues that 'most Africans recoil at these denials, which

make a mockery of painstaking scientific inquiry' while others 'consider them [European denials of the archaeological discoveries in Africa] as classical monumental acts of ingratitude of man to his birthplace - the Motherland' (Ayittey, 1992:4). What is pertinent here is the fact that the creation of the Black counter-discourse, started over four centuries ago is still being elaborated upon, at least by Black non-creative writers. It is crucial to note, however, that Ayittey, who irreverently and cynically dismisses contemporary African leaders as kleptomaniacs and betrayers, romanticizes pre-colonial African legendary kings and their political systems. The historical representation of pre-colonial Africa which emerges after this casual examination of Williams's, Clegg's and Ayittey's texts reinforces the main thesis being investigated in this background chapter: that pre-European Black Africa is romanticized and projected as a Golden Age by most Black writers - a view discounted by the novels selected for this study.

It is pertinent to indicate here, rather briefly, the general Eurocentric reactions to the Black counter-image. European writers tend to dismiss the Black collective image of Africa, particularly the thesis of J.E. De Graft-Johnson (1954), Cheikh Anta Diop (1974) and Chancellor Williams (1971). The Eurocentric dismissals are based on the grounds that these major works are laced with historical inaccuracies. The Black re-interpretations of African history are fiercely rejected by European writers like Claude Wauthier (1978), Roland Oliver (1981) and others. A classic dismissal of this thesis is Roland Oliver's curt dismissal of Diop's view that the Ancient Egyptian civilization was Black. In response to Diop's chapter on Egyptology and the 1974 Cairo conference of African historians in G. Mokhtar's *Ancient Civilizations of Africa II* (1981), Oliver writes:

> ... of the sixty-odd contributions there is only one which is *a total nonsense*. This is a chapter by a rumbustious Senegalese museum director, Cheikh Anta Diop, who has made a lifelong hobby of the thesis that the Ancient Egyptians were black.
>
> (Oliver, 1981:299, my emphasis)

The question which immediately arises is how the critique reconciles the two contrary views. It is, therefore, important to recapitulate the point which has been already made in the introductory paragraphs of this chapter: namely, that what is crucial to this study is not whether the views expressed by these texts are reconcilable with African historiography or not, but rather that they conform with the dominant radical Black tradition which argues that pre-colonial Africa had a Golden Age.

The immediate concern of the survey is to take a brief critical look at the selected texts which, like the five primary works, depart from the trend that romanticizes pre-colonial Africa and instead, censure it. The selected Black texts which challenge the collective Black image of Africa, besides the five main texts, are S.M. Molema's *The Bantu: Past and Present* (1920), Paul Hazoume's *Doguicimi*, (1937, cited in Wauthier, 1966: 101), Ferdinand Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal* (1956), Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), and Bonnie Lubega's *The Outcasts* (1971).

For the sake of brevity, the chapter will give only a bird's-eye view of these five secondary works which mount an oblique subversion of the collective Black representations of Africa. S.M. Molema's non-fictional text, *The Bantu: Past and Present* (1920), emerges as the only Black non-fictional work, I believe, that openly queries the dominant Black image of Zulu

warrior-chiefs and eloquently endorses the distorted colonial version of Zulu history. Molema confirms the colonial portraits of the Zulu kings: Shaka, Mzilikazi (Matabele), Dingane, Mpande and Cetshwayo. He portrays them as bloodthirsty tyrants without any redeeming features. Molema's account compares the Nguni, who are said to be inherently blood-thirsty, with the peace-loving Sotho and Tswana. Shaka and Mzilikazi are indicted as symbols of Nguni destructiveness and bloodthirstiness (Molema, 1920:81).

Molema's negative portrayals of the Zulu and Matabele kings might have been influenced by the fact that he himself was a direct descendant of Tauana, the Barolong king (Molema, 1920:42-43), whose kingdom is reported to have been destroyed by Mzilikazi's warriors led by Prince Langa (Molema, 1920:42). His anger towards the Zulu and the Matabele warrior-chiefs is probably triggered by the past massacres and humiliations of his ancestors during the *difaqane*. Molema's corrosive censure of the Zulu and Matabele kings is a great departure from the cumulative Black image of African warrior-chiefs. An interesting contrast, however, is H.I.E. Dhlomo's celebration of King Cetshwayo from which the epigram which opens this chapter is taken (1985).

The first creative work which mounts a veiled denunciation of the collective Black counter-image of pre-colonial Africa is Paul Hazoume's *Doguicimi* (1937). Unlike the Black texts which celebrate pre-colonial Africa, Hazoume's fictional history exalts France and vilifies Dahomey and her chiefs. Hazoume's work which centres on a Dahomean princess, Doguicimi, who is the heroine, reveals his celebration of the French colonial policy of assimilation. His comment, 'the French flag ... was destined to succeed fully: that it has brought peace, freedom and humanity to Dahomey', glorifies France. The chiefs of Dahomey are, on the

other hand, repudiated for being responsible for the perpetual wars waged to procure slaves for both the slave trade and human sacrifice. The phrase, *'the incessant wars of the kings of Dahomey, the black slave trade and human sacrifices which were ruining the country rather than enriching it'* (Hazoume, 1937:509) endorses this interpretation.

Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* (1963) also indicts pre-colonial African kings and notables for their tyranny and for their role in the enslavement and sale of their people. Soyinka's ingenious plot makes it possible for dead victims of tyranny and slavery to come back to the world of the living, after eight centuries of horrendous wandering in the limbo of the spirit world, in order to confront the traitors and the corrupt tyrants whose repeated crimes and historical follies have turned Mother Africa into a 'branded womb' (1963:64) whose issues are metaphysically born dead. What this study is concerned with is investigating how the novel's reconstruction endorses the colonial version of African history.

The plot of Soyinka's play is built around a request from town dwellers to the forest dwellers, inhabitants of a spirit world, to bring several legendary ancestors into the human world so that they may grace a magnificent feast, 'The Gathering of the Tribes'. Such an event, we are told, which is considered a historical epoch in itself, occurs only once in several lifetimes. To commemorate this historic occasion, the elders of the living invite their dead progenitors who symbolize the sublime qualities of the race: nobility and fabled epic heroism. The sentiments of the notables are formulated by Adenebi, the Council Orator, who, in his former life (about 800 years before),

was the corrupt Court Historian in the reign of King Mata Kharibu:

> The accumulated heritage that is what we are celebrating. Mali. Chaka. Songhai. Glory. Empires.
>
> (Soyinka, 1973:11)

The desire to celebrate the Golden Age of Africa is further reiterated by Adenebi in more elaborate terms:

> ... bring home the descendants of our great forebears. Find them. Find the scattered sons of our proud ancestors. The builders of empires. The descendants of our great nobility. Find them. Bring them here. If they are half-way across the world, trace them. If they are in hell, ransom them. Let them symbolize all that is noble in our nation. Let them be our historical link for the season of rejoicing. Warriors. Sages. Conquerors. Builders. Philosophers. Mystics. Let us assemble them round the totem of the nation and we will drink their resurrected glory.
>
> (Soyinka, 1973:31)

Soyinka's play subverts the notion of Africa's Golden Age. The questions posed by this work and the answers supplied are all revealed by the personality of the representatives sent by the ancestral spirits invited from the other world. Instead of the fabulous heroes of Africa - Sundiata of Mali, Mansa Musa of Mali (whose 'golden' pilgrimage to Mecca led to the depreciation of gold in Egypt), Emperor Shaka the Great, Nana Agyeman Prempeh I of Ashanti and others - it is two victims of Africa's ancient tyranny and slavery who turn up. The expected guests of honour turn out to be accusers: a former captain in the service of an ancient African king, Mata Kharibu, and his murdered pregnant wife. The dead warrior's crimes had been his refusal to wage a war on another king whose wife, Madame Tortoise, Mata Kharibu has stolen, and his refusal to copulate with the Queen, Madame Tortoise, who was a veritable whore. The captain had accepted castration and slavery for himself and death for his wife and unborn child, who is destined to live inside its mother's womb

for 800 years in the world of the dead. The crucial comment Soyinka makes here is that there are situations in which the individual has the right to disobey the ruling elite. That time, Soyinka suggests, comes when the petty interests of the rulers threaten the very survival of the larger community.

This play mounts a subtle but powerful dramatic repudiation of the romanticized dominant Black image of pre-colonial Africa. Soyinka's literary disfigurement of warrior-kingship is unmasked by the satanic cruelty displayed by King Mata Kharibu and his Queen: the castration of the warrior, his sale into slavery and the murder of his wife and unborn baby. Through this ingenious creative technique, Soyinka links the past to the present, and then makes the two dead victims condemn both the past and the present. This perception is confirmed by the fact that Adenebi, the current Council Orator, was, in his former life, the dishonest Court Historian who defended the king against the warrior and received a bribe from the European slave trader whose slave ship carried the castrated captain into slavery. In his present life Adenebi is a corrupt councillor who gives owners of vehicles more passenger quotas than is allowed by the law and receives bribes for this racketeering. In the same way, Madame Tortoise, alias Rola, was formerly a prostitute and a nymphomaniac who devoured teenage boys as in her present life. The accumulated heritage Adenebi clamours for is nothing but a cycle of repeated historical follies. It is persistently intimated that Africa's rites of passage are thus derailed by endless cycles of illusions.

The third black creative text which challenges the Black romanticized view of traditional Africa is Ferdinand Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal* (1967), originally published in French in

1956. Oyono's portrait of the protagonist, Prince Meka, and most of the other characters support the view that the author consciously or unconsciously celebrates the European notion of timeless infantilism and primitiveness in traditional Africa.

The various elements of this novel tend to disfigure the cumulative Black image of warrior-chiefs and pre-European Africa. Oyono reinforces his vision of the racially-based European image of Africa's primeval puerilism and barbarism by presenting the powerless, poverty-stricken protagonist as an embodiment of the degraded colonial portrait of traditional African rulers. Meka is a descendant of the powerful and tyrannical Chief Meka, his despotic grandfather, who once ruled the country tyrannically. Oyono's representation of Chief Meka reveals the state of affairs in the pre-colonial period. Chief Meka's reign is portrayed as the apogee of tyranny and enslavement of the weak, particularly women. Pre-European Africa is thus presented as a continent afflicted by prehistoric barbarism and violence. We are told that the first European who enters Chief Meka's kingdom is killed and his skull is kept as a trophy which is presented to Prince Meka by his grandfather when he shows an act of courage by killing his first panther. Oyono's Africa eloquently confirms the vile colonial image of Africa as the dark continent of barbarism and violence.

If we chart the rites of passage of Kelara, Meka's wife, from the time her tyrannical and royal father, obsessively dominated by enslavement of the weak, traded her in for a dynastic alliance with Chief Meka to her final self-illumination during the absurd medal ceremony, Oyono's visionary reconstruction of pre-colonial Africa is revealed. The dawn of Kalera's awareness of her own and

Meka's self-deception and dim-wittedness is triggered by the French Commandant's houseboy's fantastic insight:

> I think they ought to have covered him in medals. That would have been a bit more like it! To think he lost his land and sons just for that ....
>
> (Oyono, 1967:94)

The houseboy's remark is a catalyst in the diabolical exploitation of the Mekas by the French colonial administration. Meka is being rewarded for his services to the French colonial government. The services rendered include the following: his giving his ancestral land to the Catholic Church for the construction of a church - a church in which he is not allowed to sit though he is a devout Christian; his being the best cocoa farmer; and his sending his only two children to fight in the French colonial wars in which they are killed. For these services Meka is promised a huge reward by the French colonial government: a medal to be presented to him by the Chief of Whites in a special ceremony. The dim-witted African community perceives the medal not just as a piece of metal, a mere token, but as the greatest achievement which will usher in a new dispensation for the entire African society. It is seen as an act which will change their social status from the servile role of slaves to a position of equality with the whites.

Oyono further highlights his vision of pre-colonial Africa as a land of ageless infantilism by manipulating the reactions of the African society to Meka's savage brutalization and exploitation by the French colonial administration. His ritualization at the close of the novel of Meka's homecoming after his horrendous humiliation and maltreatment in Gullet's prison suggests that Africa has no positive answer to the repeated historical follies which have beset her from historic times to the present. Africa,

it is intimated, has shown only empty ideological rhetoric and timid resignation in response to the centuries of slavery and exploitation it has been subjected to by both her own notables and foreign exploiters.

Oyono also uses the long-standing maltreatment of women by traditional Africa to indict the tyranny of traditional African rulers. He presents the pre-colonial period as an epoch of 'darkness' characterised by polygamy, savagery and slavery. It is repeatedly suggested that Meka's grandfather, who was a powerful king, owned everybody. The weak and the poor could be turned into slaves (Oyono, 1967:44) by powerful kings. Engamba, Meka's brother-in-law, is another notable who recalls 'the Golden Age' with nostalgia. His father, Engamba tells us, 'was one of the most powerful men in Zourian'. Engamba relates his father's enslavement of the weak and his despotic attitude to women, including even his own daughters. Oyono writes: '*Every stranger shared gourds of palm wine with him which was fetched every morning by a slave. According to whether the stranger was powerful or weak he made a friend of him or a slave*'

(Oyono, 1967:38, my emphasis).

This authorial intrusion intimates that the chief in pre-colonial Africa could turn any commoner into a slave. If we take all the thematic strands of how women are portrayed in this work, their cumulative effect points to a sustained view that condemns pre-colonial Africa for treating women as either sex objects, beasts of burden or as over-exploited bread winners. Oyono suggests that this is a society so dominated by male chauvinism that women have become mere servants or tools to be used in the gratification of male needs. This debasement of womanhood is re-enacted in an incident in which Nkolo, a polygamous husband, offers one of his

wives to his guest, Engamba. The casualness of Nkolo's tone intimates that the invitation for Engamba to copulate with the wife conforms with the existing traditions:

> 'If your feet ever bring you,' Nkolo invites Engamba, 'to Ngolman you would drink good palm wine and the wine in its turn will drink you... My third wife has a lively style, she would warm your back...'
>
> (Oyono, 1967:36)

It is pertinent to point out that in *Wild Conquest* (1951:194-204), Abrahams, whose aim is obviously to rehabilitate Africa's 'noble savage image', also creates an episode in which Dabula, Captain of Mzilikazi's army, goes with another warrior, Ndawe, in search of sexual pleasure. On their arrival at a village, the chief is tricked into believing that Dabula is Prince Langa. The village chief promptly offers two of his newest wives, who are still virgins, to the warriors for copulation:

> "We are honoured. The arm around your body is that of a prince. Look at the face of Prince Langa and be honoured, my women! ... My prince! The one you hold is untouched as are these other two. They are my newest wives and I have not yet known them. You are my guests, if you wish them, I am honoured. They are for you."
>
> (Abrahams, 1951:199)

After the copulation, the chief declares that he is prepared to reserve these two women for their pleasure permanently if his warrior guests so wish. The members of the community who bear the brunt of the oppression and exploitation during this period, it is suggested, are the women. It is intimated, at least by the women, that the colonial system, particularly Christianity, saves them from the exploitive polygamous marriage system which reduces women to servitude. Abrahams' inclusion of this episode is difficult to unravel because it undermines the main thrust of his novel.

Another feature of disfigurement of this period revealed by Oyono is the reduction of women to the level of beasts of burden. Amalia, Engamba's wife is said to be 'like a docile donkey' (Oyono, 1967:54). The following extract reinforces the exploitation of the traditional women by their husbands who are supposed to provide for the family. The situation of the husband providing for his wife and children is reversed here:

> She [Amalia] resumed the tread of a beast of burden. She had carried some heavy baskets. Baskets of wood, every time she came back from the fields, baskets of sand for the hut or for the road, baskets of stones for the priest's house so she could go to confession.... All those baskets had hollowed out that sharp angle in her back like the notch in some tree stricken to death by the axe. The skin around that place had become as thick as an elephant's.
>
> (Oyono, 1967:55)

The traditional woman's ability to provide for husband and children becomes the deciding factor in her ability to get a husband. We are told that as a teenager, Amalia was rather weak and could not carry heavy baskets of provision. After constant warning from her mother that no man would marry her because she was too weak, Amalia resorts to a ruse. One day, she carries lots of baskets and walks through the village pretending to be the hardiest woman there. She carries this heavy load supported by ropes which bite into her flesh, hurting her. But she conceals the pain and suffering by singing at the top of her voice, creating the impression that she is enjoying it all (Oyono, 1967:55-6). The outcome of this subterfuge is that she receives ten marriage offers that day. The thematic significance of this incident is the fact that Engamba is one of the ten men who offer to marry her. Equally relevant to our discussion is the fact that Engamba, a wealthy noble man who already has many wives, is chosen by Amalia. Amalia's reason for rejecting young bachelors for a polygamous man discounts the African notion of pre-colonial

Africa being a Golden Age. Amalia chooses the polygamous Engamba because "With him at least, ... the wife's work will be shared..." (Oyono, 1967:56).

This novel suggests that if pre-European Africa were paradisal, then that paradise was certainly only for noble men. Anyone who has read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) will immediately appreciate the conflicting creative purposes of the two writers: Achebe's Umoufia and Okonkwo are not without weaknesses but we admire them; there is nothing to admire in Oyono's traditional Africa, Meka or any of the other characters.

Bonnie Lubega's *The Outcasts* (1971) is the last text for examination in this section. Like the other works which challenge the Black collective image of Africa, Lubega's work discounts the dominant Black image of pre-European Africa. Lubega deploys sexual connotations (which are too obscene to quote) which portray pre-colonial Africa as a barbarous and squalid world which wallows in sexual debauchery and vulgarity. His revolting fictional milieu subverts the collective Black image of Africa. The author's description of sexual intercourse between the protagonist, Karekyezi, and his wife, Kabahuma, is expressed in such nauseating terms that one wonders whether Lubega was born and bred in Africa.

The tired Kabahuma, the reader is told, was lying naked in bed, 'sweating like a fat chicken roasting on a barbecue grill' when 'Karekyezi peeled off his own clothes, and plunged his lank body between her massive sweating, slippery thighs.' As if this foul sexual commentary is not enough, Lubega adds that 'His hand was now working, his fingers gently pulling and stroking her natural things.' 'These', the reader's feelings are further assaulted,

'she had elongated to some few inches by means of pulling at them with certain herbs when she reached puberty' (Lubega, 1971:38-40).

What emerges from the textual analysis of this work is the view that Lubega is manipulating the degrading noble savage image one often finds in colonial texts on Africa. The only meaningful insight signalled by the above stylistic patterning is the view that Lubega's representation confirms the distorted colonial image of the people of pre-colonial Africa. In this work Lubega repeatedly violates traditional African ethics. One classic example of this moral violation is Karekyezi's invitation to his youngest son, Kagabu, to find out from his mother how sexually virile he is. A father inviting his fourteen-year old son to find out from his mother how well he performs in bed is totally unacceptable in African traditional ethics and is completely unrealistic (Lubega, 1971:16).

In a deliberate attempt to provoke a cattle owner after he has stolen enough cattle to start his own ranch, Karekyezi resorts to the most disgusting and obscene exchange in the work. He asks the cattle owner who wants to know why no milk was distributed when Karekyezi was away: 'Do you expect me to milk Kabahuma's teats or my penis to get enough milk for people to drink?' (Lubega 1971:84). The novel teems with vulgar language, obscenity, primeval backwardness and foul comments on genitality, anality and other unflattering sexual functions. The constant repetition of bodily odours, filthiness and obesity suggest that the central concern of this work is the bestiality of the cattle herdsmen. Why Lubega mounts a sustained assault on the sensibility of the reader with minute details of a culture which worships filth, obscenity, and sexual openness completely un-

African and his fetish bond to the excremental vision is hard to unravel.

A graphic illustration of this excremental vision is the incident in which Kagabu is attacked by a huge python while he is busy defecating. Though he succeeds in killing the snake, he is covered in his own excreta, which evokes derisive comments from his father. And even so, this physical deprivation is not as devastating as the cultural degeneration which Lubega draws our attention to. The custom in which a man engaged to be married must submit to a ritual in which his father rapes his bride on the eve of his marriage in order to determine whether she is still a virgin is incredible even in fiction.

Though African aesthetics detests looking for foreign sources in African creative writing, one cannot help noticing Lubega's obsession with animalism, repulsive anal and sexual functions, and revolting bodily odours celebrated in Jonathan Swift's works. Swift's vision of man as the odious Yahoo is a creative technique in which he uses excrement and disgusting human bodily functions as a powerful weapon in his assault on human pretensions, pride and self-centredness. What Lubega's creative aim is in manipulating a similar literary device is difficult to decipher without a knowledge of the ethnic milieu within which Lubega's narrative is conceived. It is interesting to note that Lubega, who is himself a Muganda, chooses to cast non-Baganda (Karekyezi and Kabahuma are names from the immigrant Bahima tribe in Buganda) as the principal culprits in his defilement of African customs[7].

This background investigation has unearthed the genesis of the ambivalence and the overwhelming disenchantment that dominate

contemporary African creative writings. There are two major trends in African creative writing: works which present an idyllic portrayal of pre-colonial Africa in consonance with Africa's Golden Age and texts that contend that the seeds of the moral muck which engulfs contemporary Africa were planted by the legendary godlike kings of pre-colonial, perceived by the majority of the present generation of Blacks as the heroes and the creators of Africa's Golden Age. With the exception of a few Black literary texts - including the five fictional histories selected for this investigation - the general tone of the rejection of the romanticized image of traditional Africa and its rulers in Black writings remains light-hearted. How the primary texts chosen for this study echo this literary Black minority voice of censure constitutes the nucleus of this critical analysis.

NOTES

1. Ananse, the Ghanaian trickster hero, a many-faced traditional con man and a master of guile, who dominates Ghanaian folklore, has never, I believe, been portrayed in any of the folktales as a Creator God. See Robert D. Pelton's *The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight* (1989:25-70). Berkeley: Univ. of California Press.

2. This bogus myth of origin was obviously fabricated by William Bosman in his *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (1705, 1967:146,147, cited in Gates, 1987:15-16) for Africa with the aim of sanctioning the enslavement of Black Africans.

3. G.W.F. Hegel's *The Philosophy of History* was first published in German in the nineteenth century and later translated into English and other languages. This citation comes from the 1956 Dover edition, pp.91-92.

4. The dichotomy of denigration and romanticization of Chief Rabeh projected by the French colonial official, Bretonnet's portrait and that of Arab Djama Babikir, contained in Bakibir's *L'Empire de Rabeh* (1950:80, cited in Claude Wauthier, 1978:95), reveal the conflicting attitudes of Eurocentric and Black writers to traditional Africa. The French colonial recorder describes Chief Rabeh as 'a common slave trafficker' and while Babikir showers him with praises.

5. A casual analysis of the historical and creative portraits of Shaka in select African works suggests that Black South African writers from other ethnic groups which were adversely affected by the *difaqane* ('The Wars of Calamity') tend to condemn Shaka and his military expansion while Black writers outside the theatre of the 'Shakan revolution' and Zulus are inclined to glorify Shaka's image.

6. Diop's manipulation of Jean Francis Champollion's interpretation of Egyptian legends is uncanny. The Senegalese author's use of the Ancient Egyptian rock-face inscription to substantiate his view that the Europeans were indeed perceived by Ancient Egyptians as occupying the lowest level on the great chain of human beings is ironic in its reversal of the European relegation of the Africans to that same status.

7. The effect of Lubega's portrayal is that a Muganda reading *The Outcast* (1971) would not feel defiled but would tend to agree with Lubega by being able to stand outside the novel's context, on the superior ground. The novel thus succeeds only as a vehicle for demonstrating the ethnic superiority of the Buganda at the expense of the African image which never comes to the author's mind.

Chapter 2

Thomas Mopoku Mofolo's "Inverted Epic Hero": A Reading of Mofolo's *Chaka* as an African Epic Folktale

> With Shaka's death the sun went down on an era of great achievement and the glory with which he had gilded the Zulu name lost much of its lustre.
>
> Aubrey Elliot. *Sons of Zulu* (1978.

> Civilizations pass away, but the glory of men who toiled to build them remains forever.
>
> Jonathan Norton Leonard. *Ancient America* (1968).

> History shows us the life of nations and finds nothing to narrate but wars and tumults; the peaceful years appear only as occasional brief pauses and interludes. In just the same way the life of the individual is a constant struggle, and not merely a metaphorical one against want and boredom, but also an actual struggle against other people. He discovers adversaries everywhere, lives in continual conflict and dies with sword in hand.
>
> Arthur Schopenhauer. *Essays and Aphorisms* (1970).

The main preoccupation of this chapter is to provide an alternative reading of the text by investigating the thesis that Thomas Mopoku Mofolo's *Chaka* (1925; 1981)[1] has initiated what amounts to a literary subversion of the collective Black image[2] of Shaka, the Zulus and in general, traditional Africa and its legendary heroes. The detailed investigation of the corpus of selected Black texts in Chapter 1 reveals that the current

dominant Black representation of Africa and its legendary heroes constitutes a Black counter-image which challenges the Eurocentric portrayals which malign traditional Africa and peoples of Black African descent. This study posits that it is this Black image of pre-European Africa and its legendary heroes which the five novelistic histories selected for this study seriously question. The epigrams which open this critique - Aubrey Elliot's historical celebration of Chaka's career and a modern mural inscription from Mexico City's National Museum of Anthropology cited in Jonathan Norton Leonard's *Ancient America* (1968:177) - all echo the sentiments of Black Africa's collective image of pre-European Africa. Black Africa's pride in her past, which is outlined in the background chapter, is also illuminated by another Aztec Mexican aphorism which asserts that 'Men find, in the greatness of their past, courage and confidence for the future' (Leonard, 1968:180). The last epigram, taken from Arthur Schopenhauer's *Essays and Aphorisms* - a truism declaring that the nations of the world are perpetually plagued by 'wars and tumults' (1970:42) - finally situates Chaka's revolutionary wars within the larger universal military context. The location of the Zulu King's warrior-oriented reign within the universal martial tradition appears to challenge the views which perceive his career as just another incidence of savagery and bloodletting in 'Dark Africa'.

The substantiation of this thesis entails unravelling just how Mofolo[3] has effected the disfigurement of the dominant image of traditional Africa in general and of Chaka in particular. The African oral epic bard, the guise under which Mofolo's narrator[4] operates, tells a traditional tale composed of myth, legend, fiction and history. The sacrosanct bardic tradition within which the oral poet operates is defined by Walter J. Ong in his *Orality and Literacy: The Technologization of the Word* as 'a kind of autonomous discourse in fixed ritual formulas ... as well as in vatic sayings or prophesies, for which the utterer himself or

herself is considered only the channel, not the source' (1982:78). The oral epical boundaries within which the traditional artist has to confine his tale is further articulated by Berkley Peabody in his work, *The Winged Word: A Study in the Technique of Ancient Greek Oral Composition as Seen Principally through Hesiod's Works and Days* (1975). Peabody asserts that 'A singer effects, not a transfer of his own intentions, but a conventional realization of traditional thought for his listeners, including himself' (1975:175, cited in Ong, 1982:145).

The above analysis demonstrates that all oral cultures impose their aesthetic authority upon the epic story-teller. Since Mofolo's creative purpose is to effect 'a transfer of his own intentions' contrary to the sacrosanct epic traditions, he must find a way to transcend this restriction in order to achieve his aim of portraying Chaka as an evil hero. To overcome this creative problem, Mofolo evokes two opposing narratorial roles: the role of the traditional bard who tells his tale within the inflexible authoritative confines of the African epic oral tradition - the celebration of the epic hero - and the role of the anti-traditional (*neo-traditional*) narrator who creates his own anti-epic version of Chaka's career. Mofolo's neo-traditional narrator symbolizes the role of modern African artists who use traditional tools to create works of art which incorporate both traditional and modern Africa - works which are no longer pure traditional projects. The text's neo-traditional voice projects the vision of a modern educated narrator, who, guided by his own world-view, repudiates facets of traditional Africa's heritage and history, while assimilating aspects of European ethos.

This study submits, therefore, that Mofolo's narrator's multiple identity could be described as an amalgam of the African traditional court historian or the *imbongi*, who is the keeper of the cultural and historical treasures of his community, and a neo-traditional narrator - a modern anti-traditional narrator,

determined to divest traditional Africa of what he sees as its cultural and historical weaknesses. In Mofolo's *Chaka*, the neo-traditional narrator operates like 'the [Greek] *histor* who 'has an ancient and natural affinity with his narrative predecessor, the inspired bard of Homeric epic' (Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg:1966:266). Despite this resemblance with the oral bard, the *histor*, unlike the traditional *imbongi*, has the authority to project conflicting versions of the tale. In their *The Nature of Narrative* (1966:266) Scholes and Kellogg define the *histor* as follows: 'the narrator as inquirer, constructing a narrative on the basis of such evidence as he has been able to accumulate ... a man, in short, of authority, who is entitled not only to present the facts as he has established them but to comment on them, to draw parallels, to moralize, to generalize, to tell the reader what to think ....' The brilliance of Mofolo's style derives from his ability to conceal the irreverent anti-bardic discourse beneath the idealized surface manifestations of the narrative prior to Chaka's fateful meeting with Isanusi - an encounter which marks a watershed in the budding epic hero's life.

It is quite clear that although Mofolo's work incorporates Christian mythology and the European realistic mimetic tradition, *Chaka* is structured around the framework of African oral epic traditions. To put it differently, Mofolo's *Chaka* is principally an "inverted" African epic folktale. Mofolo's genius lies in his presenting a stylistic cocktail which derives from a network of juxtapositions of ideological, stylistic, historical and cultural conflicts. The central core of Mofolo's ingenious style flows from the novel's pervasive equivocation, which is fed by a web of counter discourses generated by the disparity between the conflicting narrative voices: the conflict between evil and good; the ideological impasse between African traditional heritage and European Christian ethics; the clash between the African tale-technique and the European realistic novel tradition; the clash

between African nationalism and Sotho ethnic sentiments; and the stylistic and thematic conflicts between African oral epic traditions and Mofolo's unique inversion of African oral epic narrative devices and heroic attributes. Thus, Mofolo's finished product, though mantled in the garb of the traditional African oral epic, uses the African oral epic structure only as a creative mask which conceals his evil 'anti-epic hero', who is totally irreconcilable with the conventional oral epic hero of the traditional African oral artist. How Mofolo has succeeded, through his ingenious manipulation of the traditional African bard's epic heroic narrative tools, traditionally reserved for celebrating communal heroes, in portraying Chaka as 'an inverted epic hero' without any redeeming virtues, is one of the major concerns of this study. It is also submitted that the question of why Mofolo chose to portray Chaka as an evil hero needs to be taken further. Instead of scrutinizing the reasons behind Mofolo's negative portrayal of Chaka, the critique will investigate why the Sotho author found it necessary to repudiate the African legendary tradition, and to re-define the African epic genre and the epic hero. The immediate task is to review the critical viewpoints relevant to the rationale in approaching *Chaka* as an African epic folktale.

The rationale for the Afrocentric approach adopted by this critique is validated by a host of critics, such as Ben Obumselu, who perceive the novel as a folk narrative. In his 'Mofolo's *Chaka* and the Folk Tradition' (in C. Heywood ed., 1975) Obumselu asserts that although the Christian reading of the text offers a useful way to interpret the novel, the work's equivocal structure suggests that '*Chaka* is a more interesting work when it is approached as folk narrative' (1975:33). Donald Burness also contends that *Chaka* can be read as an African folktale when he declares in his *Shaka: King of the Zulus in African Literature* that 'the narrative ... can be considered as *an extended praise song singing the deeds of this heroic Zulu leader; it can be*

regarded as an African epic celebrating the founding of an empire ...' (1976:2, my emphasis). Although Armah's review presents a one-sided interpretation of Mofolo's *Chaka*, his Afrocentric reading of the novel nevertheless reinforces my rationale in approaching it as an African epic folktale (1976:11).

Mofolo's *Chaka*, written in Sotho in 1909 and published in 1925, is acclaimed internationally as a masterpiece. In his review, entitled 'The Definitive Chaka', Ayi Kwei Armah describes *Chaka* as 'a literary masterpiece' and 'one of the world's most skilfully crafted works of art' (1976:10). Neil Lazarus echoes Armah's view when he asserts in his article, 'The Logic of Equivocation in Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*', that '*Chaka* is an extraordinary and enigmatic work of literature' and 'is increasingly recognised as a work of the greatest value and relevance, demanding the close attention of all scholars of African literature' (1986:41). Janheinz Jahn's *Neo-African Literature: A History of Black Writing* (1968) also describes the work as 'the first historical novel in modern African literature and a masterpiece' (1968:101). Albert S. Gerard, one of the first European critics to evaluate the novel in his work *Four African Literatures* (1971:127-131), confirms the complexity and enigma of Mofolo's work. In his 'Rereading *Chaka*', Gerard declares that the novel is not only 'a major landmark in the literary history of modern black Africa', but also a 'baffling' work, 'which to this day has been misread and misunderstood' (1986:1, 5). Gerard's critical insight is confirmed by Lazarus who observes that owing to the novel's enigmatic and equivocal structure, Mofolo's *Chaka* 'has managed to mean very different things to different readers both in the past and today' (1986:41). The French missionaries who first read the manuscript, it is asserted, were divided into two opposing literary camps: one group interpreted the novel as an apology for paganism, bloodletting and witchcraft while the other group saw it as a

Christian-inspired work which condemns paganism, bloodshed and witchcraft in Black Africa.

The current body of criticism on Mofolo's *Chaka* is still plagued by sharply conflicting interpretations which can be divided into three categories which affirm the complexity and the enigma of the novel. The first group of critics read *Chaka* as an Afrocentric novel devoted exclusively to African traditions and conditions. The critical advocate of this camp, who contends that Mofolo's *Chaka* is an African folktale designed to project Black African conditions, is Ayi Kwei Armah. Armah asserts that 'Chaka's life, his psychology, his problems and his achievements offer insights central to the African condition ...' (1976:11). The second group are the Eurocentric-oriented critics, both Black and European, who perceive Mofolo's *Chaka* principally as a Christian-oriented novel crafted to condemn paganism, barbarism, bloodletting, and witchcraft in traditional Africa. This group sees Isanusi solely through the point of view of Christian ethics and Jewish mythology. The most eloquent advocate of this viewpoint is Derek Wright, whose critical formulation is expressed in his 'The Chaka Syndrome: Armah and Mofolo'. Wright's reading of Mofolo's *Chaka,* which presents Isanusi as an incarnation of Satan in consonance with Christian mythology (1985:44), focuses only on one side of Mofolo's enigmatic work. Mbongeni Malaba in his article, 'The Legacy of Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*' (1986:60-61)[5], echoes Wright's interpretation and perceives the work as an essentially Christian treatise devoted to propagating Christian ethics and vilifying Africa's paganism and bloodthirstiness. 'Isanusi epitomises Satanic guile,' Malaba maintains, 'cloaking his malice with sweet reasonableness' (1986:60). Kolawole Ogungbesan's 'A King for All Seasons' (1974 /1975:87) also focuses its attention on Mofolo's Christian background and the textual evidence projecting Christian morality. The third general interpretation of *Chaka*, which I endorse, postulates that the novel's equivocal structure

discounts any reading which focuses only on a one-sided view of the work's dual vision, highlighted by Isanusi's double visage as both good and evil or as a traditional African healer/diviner and a diabolical sorcerer or Satan. This one-sided reading, it is argued, amounts to a misreading of the novel.

Mofolo's depiction of the first meeting between Chaka and Isanusi substantiates his enigmatic portrayal and style. This narrative structure embodies within its boundary the antithesis of evil and good. Isanusi is portrayed both as a diabolic sorcerer or Satan and as a traditional diviner or a healer. The antithetical attributes of the portrait of Isanusi and the paradoxical discourses validate the novel's equivocation:

> When Chaka first woke up from sleep, and their eyes met, he saw that the man's face was distorted with hate, and his lips were like those of a man sick with nausea, and right inside the farthest depths of his eyes he saw malice and unbound cruelty, he saw someone who had more evil in his heart than any murderer, the very incarnation of malice, treachery and betrayal. His body shuddered, and he blinked his eyes. Then when he looked at the man again, he found that his face showed sympathy and pity, and he saw profound compassion and a heart that felt the grief of others, and had true love. The face he had first seen was completely gone. (p.37)

Though this does not suggest two different narrative voices and only signifies two different interpretations of data in the narrative, Mofolo's manipulation of the device of the union of opposites in this narrative structure further reinforces the novel's ambiguity. This extract provides evidence of the controversy the novel generates with its conflicting views on traditional African and Christian polarities coupled with its Macbethian and Faustian themes. The bi-focal vision displayed by Isanusi's dual visage is difficult to explicate with certainty. However, the novel's twin-structured design generates enough antithetical evidence to support the two opposing interpretations - the Afrocentric and the Eurocentric views of the novel - in

such a way as to suggest a quite different understanding of Mofolo's project.

Another graphic example of the novel's twin structure is revealed during the mystical doctoring of Chaka by Isanusi. Isanusi tells Chaka that the medicine he is about to be inoculated with is 'a medicine associated with the spilling of blood, with killing: *"It is extremely evil, but it is also extremely good"*' (p.43, my emphasis). The novel's equivocation is further sanctioned by the intriguing trope in the incident in which Isanusi justifies war by equating 'a cultivator of kingship' to 'the diligent cultivator of sorghum'. In his own words, 'Where necessary, you must reduce everything to total annihilation, sweep it all away, and never let your enemy escape lest he should afterwards rise against you' (p.46). The lesson being drummed into Chaka's mind is that just as the diligent sorghum farmer is compelled to ruthlessly root out the weeds that would threaten the possibility of any future harvest, the 'seeker of supreme kingship' must wield his spear like a hoe in demolishing all his enemies. But the sorghum farmer tills the soil and produces food for the preservation of human lives - a vocation which is antithetical to the destruction of lives Isanusi recommends to Chaka for attainment of supreme power. The underlying insight generated by this paradoxical imagery is that Chaka is projected both as a potential messenger of destruction and as a symbol of life-generating forces. Besides the three illustrations given above, *Chaka* is steeped in ambiguous narrative structures, particularly the text's parodic-cum-ironic treatment of praise singing, which support its equivocation.

The most ardent critical advocate of this interpretation is Lazarus, whose essay crystallizes the novel's enigmatic design in stating that 'The textual evidence seems to leave open the possibility of an interpretation of Isanusi as the very antithesis of an inhuman Satan-figure' (Lazarus, 1986:53).

Lazarus further contends that the novel's structure teems with paradoxical narrative structures which substantiate the two major irreconcilable views. He reaffirms this critical formulation as follows:

> On the contrary, it is precisely my argument that each of their [Burness's and Armah's][6] interpretations find at least qualified substantiation in *Chaka*. To "explain" this apparent paradox it will be necessary, once more, to invoke the fact of the novel's equivocation. For Isanusi is both *Satan and seer/healer*.
>
> (Lazarus, 1976:52-53)

Though my reading of Mofolo's *Chaka* fully endorses Lazarus' interpretation, it questions the one-sided views of both Armah and Wright and others. Daniel Kunene in his *Thomas Mofolo and the Emergence of Written Sotho Prose* (1989), also corroborates the text's structural dualism: 'The question of choice, ... is inextricably intertwined with the soothsayer character of Isanusi whose dual visage is paralleled throughout the story by a consistent duplicity.' The novel's enigma is further confirmed by Kunene's unambiguous verification. Kunene declares that 'This kind of deliberate equivocation, together with frequent juxtapositions of antithetical statements and situations, often resulting in irony, characterises Chaka's relationship with Isanusi and his disciples ...' (Kunene, 1989:116-117).

Lazarus observes that Mofolo plays conflicting creative roles and then further postulates that 'the novel's equivocation is not an accident but a defining characteristic, structuring it and permeating its every aspect' (1986:47). Lazarus contends that '... *Chaka* might be said to be a work that seeks to unify contradictions (historical, aesthetic, psychological) that are revealed as not unifiable.... The attempt is flawed because it has to be flawed, because, ultimately, Mofolo's was not a world that could be ordered, but only laid open in all its contradictions' (Lazarus 1986:43). The thrust of Lazarus's reading maintains that the text is dominated by a series of twin

clashes, the most overt being the perpetual conflict between the Eurocentric and Afrocentric discourses. Yet, although I endorse Lazarus's critical view that the work is dominated by conflicting narrative voices, particularly the anti-traditional-African and Eurocentric discourses which battle for supremacy within the text, I reject the actual evidence cited by Lazarus in support of this interpretation (1986:48-49).

For example the novel's opening paragraph about the fertility of the land, the fatness of its cattle, the abundance of food and the ethnographic paragraph about African traditional mystical beliefs in snakes and water serpents do not in any way constitute conflicting narrative voices. Lazarus's confusion, it appears, stems from his interpreting the geographical paragraph as a discourse emanating from 'a chronicler in traditional idiom' who 'speaks with his people's voice of his people's experience' while classifying the paragraph on snakes and water serpents as a 'literate ... anthropological discourse' (1986:48-49). Lazarus contends that the clinical style which opens the novel is characterized by a literariness which is alien to the oral epic tradition. But is he correct here? The African and the Euro-Asian oral epic traditions are structured around an amalgam of narrative forms. The cocktail stylistic patterns which inform and shape oral epics are confirmed by Scholes and Kellogg in their work *The Nature of Narrative* in which they assert that '... the ancient epic tradition had contained everything the Greeks knew of history, geography, cosmology, ethics, physiology, and a host of subjects....' (1966:118). This insight illuminates the African traditional bardic narrative structures. In his *The Epic in Africa* (1975) Okpewho alludes to the aesthetics of the oral epic in which the griot is expected to manipulate the different narrative forms which constitute his stylistic tapestry:

> ... the intelligent bard can easily mine the broad field of local customs for details that can help him bring the world of his tale closer to that of his audience. By carefully inserting the explanatory line, he invites his audience to

> empathize with his tale by recognizing its roots in the familiar society.
>
> (Okpewho, 1975:229)

In Niane's *Sundiata*, the griot finds it necessary to employ a clinical narrative form when he portrays the origin of Mali and how the different tribes evolved in the ancient Empire of Mali (Niane 1965:2). In African oral traditions, the *imbongi* is the fountainhead of Africa's historical and cultural heritage and it is the guise of the traditional bard Mofolo assumes in the opening paragraph of the novel. The novel's opening factual discourse does not project two opposing roles as Lazarus contends, but rather complimentary roles: the guise of the traditional chronicler, who not only celebrates the communal heroes but also defends the racial and territorial survival of the society, hence the anti-colonial posture. The impersonal and the clinical tone Mofolo adopts, instead of the traditionally intimate tone of the African oral artist, does not alter his role as the African traditional chronicler. Neither does Mofolo's ethnic position as a Sotho and an outsider instead of the ideal Zulu traditional bard, alter his role. Lazarus's interpretation of Mofolo's clinical style as two conflicting roles of 'the Eurocentric literate anthropologist' and the traditional chronicler and his intimation that the matter-of-fact narrative form deployed in the opening paragraph of the text is only found in written literature, and is, therefore, foreign to the aesthetics of the African oral epic, is discounted by this investigation. What Lazarus has done is to isolate a fabric of the traditional epic style and to label it as a 'literate ... anthropological discourse'. This, it must be reiterated, does not suggest that I discount Lazarus's viewpoint on the two conflicting narrative voices which permeate the novel. What is being challenged here is the actual evidence he marshals in substantiating the novel's dual vision. The main source of novel's equivocation derives from two opposing narrative voices: the clash between the discourse projected by the 'people's

chronicler (which glorifies Chaka's image) and the anti-legendary or the Eurocentric discourse which portrays Chaka as a villain without any redeeming qualities. The text's ambiguity, as characterized by the two dominant conflicting voices, is further compounded by Mofolo's ingenious patterning of a series of twin conflicting narrative voices and his manipulation of the African oral epic tradition and the anti-Zulu narratorial intrusions.

The study needs to begin by identifying the elements of oral epic traditions Mofolo has incorporated into *Chaka* and taking a critical look at how he has manipulated these in order to achieve his creative purpose. Some of the major oral epic elements assimilated by the novel are the noble ancestry of the hero, the mysteriousness of his birth and early youth, his supernatural and magical endowments, his pre-eminence as hero, his ability to invoke supernatural agents to aid him in his destiny and his heroic martial ferocity. Besides the above heroic attributes Mofolo's *Chaka* also manipulates two major epic narrative techniques: epic horror and praise singing. All the African epic elements which are listed above provide the structuring framework of the novel.

The first fundamental attribute of the epic hero is his noble ancestry. For example, Sundiata, the fabulous epic hero of D.T. Niane's *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (1965), is a son of Emperor Nare Maghan of Mali and later becomes an emperor of Mali. His mother, Sogolon, is the mysterious 'buffalo woman' who brings to the hero all the mystic force of her totemic personality (1965:13). In the Anglo-Saxon epic, *Beowulf*, the hero proclaims his noble lineage to the Danish coast guard. Beowulf asserts that his father, Ecgtheow, 'was ... famous in many a folk-land' and was recognised as 'a leader noble' by 'every wise man' (*Beowulf*, p.11)[7]. This epic heroic quality can also be discerned in Asian epics. In the Mesopotamian work, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (1960), the epic hero is a son of the goddess Ninsun and of a priest of

Kullab and is endowed with divine powers. He is 'two thirds god' and 'one third man'. Besides this divine endowment, Gilgamesh is also King of Uruk. Similarly, the 'inverted epic hero' of Mofolo's *Chaka* also has royal origins. Chaka's father is King Senzangakhona of the Zulus, and his mother is Princess Nandi, the daughter of Prince Bhebhe of the Langeni.

Another essential epic heroic element incorporated into *Chaka* is formulated by Isidore Okpewho in his *The Epic in Africa* (1975). Okpewho reveals that the noble ancestry of the epic hero is often linked with something mysterious 'in his birth and early youth 'which sets him apart from the natural course of life and inspires awe and veneration' (1975:86). Okpewho further adds that 'The advent of the hero into the world is marked by some awe or mystery; some portentous event.' In African epics, Okpewho continues, 'it is indeed at this stage of the hero's life that the foundations of his formidable career are laid ...' (1975:86).

Like Sundiata, Chaka's birth is proclaimed by a rhetorical flourish loaded with paradox, mystery and equivocation. The first announcement of Chaka's birth by Nandi to Senzangakhona is veiled in a riddle: '"There has been born to you a boy, an ox of the vultures..."' (p.6). Sealing the message with its usual cryptic imposition, the narratorial voice, which conceals a premonition and could only be an anti-traditional tone intent on subverting Chaka's imminent epic growth, adds '... and indeed there never was a child for whom these words were more fitting. He was a male child, and he was also an ox of the vultures, as the reader will see afterwards' (p.6). Through a process of foregrounding, achieved by means of juxtaposition of the enigmatic phrase 'an ox of the vultures' with this narratorial comment, not only has the Sotho author succeeded in creating a disparity among the different viewpoints of the narrative voices and the reader but also in alerting the reader to the impending disaster which

awaits the budding epic hero as well as the community he is to lead.

The supreme irony of Mofolo's trope - 'an ox of the vultures' - is the fact that Chaka, the future '*Bayede*', the intermediary between men and God, the omnipotent tyrant, who will turn thousands into carrion for vultures and hyenas, will at the supreme height of his achievements, be killed and thrown into the veld as carrion for vultures and hyenas just like any of his own victims. This *neo-traditional* dissenting narrative voice is intent on presenting its own version of the story of Chaka. Mofolo's anti-legend narrator could also be seen as a blend of the various anti-traditional or anti-Zulu sentiments: the growing anti-legendary tradition in Africa, Sotho ethnocentrism, and Eurocentrism. This amalgam of narrative voices challenges the collective African traditional view which romanticizes Chaka's image. Although it is in its nascent form at this stage, it constitutes the corrosive discourse which will finally mature into an undisguised tone of vilification of the legendary image of Chaka.

The second proclamation of Chaka's birth is conveyed by the Zulu king's message to his Mthethwa overlord, King Jobe. In a direct contradiction of Nandi's announcement, the Zulu king's message to Jobe predicts that Chaka will inherit the Mthethwa kingship. Mofolo prefaces again the prophetic words of Chaka's future career with a traditional narratorial intrusion designed to enhance Chaka's epic growth: 'These words of Senzangakhona too foretold great events which we shall see later' (p.6). King Jobe's reply to Senzangakhona also reinforces the intimation that Chaka is destined for a glorious career. King Jobe says 'I wish that the child should grow to become both a human being and a man of worth.' The reader's attention is again jolted by the bardic narrative voice: 'Jobe too spoke like one who knew what this child was going to become in the world, and he did the proper

thing too by placing the matter in the hands of his sons' (p.6). It is obvious that Mofolo '*estranges*' or '*defamiliarizes*' some of the intrusive narratorial interpolations dealing with the announcement of Chaka's birth, to borrow from Victor Shklosvky (1965:25)[8], in order to draw the reader's attention to the fact that Chaka is a super-human personage destined for an unprecedented career. The most unambiguous declaration of Chaka's enigma, however, is presented to us by the traditional epic voice half-way through the novel (p.96):

> I do not believe that there was ever a human being whose life was as full of mystery as Chaka. Dingiswayo's life was full of darkness and secrecy, but these could be unravelled and be made intelligible; but Chaka's life has been cloaked in dark mystery until this very day.

This unambiguous admission of Chaka's enigmatic personality by the bardic narrator substantiates the view expressed in Armah's article. Armah asserts that 'Chaka has been treated like some huge elemental force beyond comprehension, a supernatural phenomenon to be feared or praised, or both, but never to be intelligently explained, never to be understood.' According to Armah, 'Mofolo's work is the most perceptive attempt to understand and explain Chaka...' (1976:10). It must be added, however, that Mofolo's portrait of Chaka is highly fictionalized and not biographical.

Under the guise of the traditional court historian or the *imbongi*, Mofolo faithfully charts in great detail Chaka's prodigious growth and supernatural development. As an infant, Mofolo's traditional narrator tells us, Chaka 'did not often cry, or he might cry only once and then keep quiet'. Besides this unusual behaviour, he does not 'beg for mercy' when he is 'chastised' or '*show any sign of repentance or run away*'. The intrusive traditional narrator adds rather casually as an afterthought that 'Chaka was, nonetheless, a peaceful little lad who did not trouble his mother with anything' (p.7). The purpose

of this commentary is to emphasize that, apart from indications of innate toughness and intrepidity, Chaka is a pleasant child and there is nothing in his early childhood that indicates the bloodthirstiness and demonic cruelty the adult Chaka is later reported to display. This narrative perspective obviously anticipates Chaka's tragic doom and suggests that Chaka is not inherently evil. Naturally, the reader will be anxious to know what later transforms Chaka into an evil hero.

A new dimension is then added to the extraordinary growth and development of the hero. Chaka is portrayed as a supernatural child endowed with the ferocious qualities of wild beasts. This hyperbolic and ornate style is in consonance with the stylistic structure which informs African oral epics and heroic poetry. Sundiata, likewise, is likened to both the lion and the buffalo and Gilgamesh is said to be 'two third god and one third man'. Chaka's supernatural and stately qualities are unveiled. 'Those who knew him [Chaka] as a child told how, even as he played with other children, any person whose eyes met his, even without having known him before, could tell at once that he was of royal blood, and not the child of a commoner ....' It is further claimed that all those who see Chaka say that 'He is the cub of a lion; he is the nurseling of a wild beast; he is a new-born little lion' (p.8).

The positive discourse of the novel has portrayed Chaka as a budding hero. He has all the hallmarks of a legendary epic hero. No other narrative voice, apart from perhaps, the mysterious one which cryptically brands him as 'an ox of the vultures' (p.6), attempts to subvert Chaka's epic heroic development. The narrative voice which celebrates Chaka's image is obviously the traditional voice of the *imbongi* while the mysterious narrative voice which describes him as 'an ox for the vultures' is the embryonic neo-traditional narrative voice which will eventually transform Chaka into an "inverted epic hero". The virtuosity of

Mofolo's style lies in the fact that this enigmatic phrase can pass easily for a harmless praise name.

The other magical attribute of the budding hero depicted by the bardic narrator is the intimation that Chaka has *a charmed life*. The reader is told that all attempts by his jealous peers to entice hyenas to carry Chaka away in the night have failed. We are told that instead of the hyena attacking Chaka when he is deliberately tied and left in the open by his enemies, it 'would simply sniff at him and pass to the far end of the hut to grab someone there' (p.27). The traumatic and horrendous experiences Chaka has been subjected to during his boyhood are unbelievable: 'Twice or three times Chaka had his hands tied there in the young people's hut, and was made to sleep outside near the door tied up like that, so that the hyena should see him as soon as it came' (p.27). The traditional voice of the *imbongi* is still in control.

It is interesting to note that the novel opens with the intimation that Chaka has a charmed life and closes with the suggestion that even his mortal remains cannot be violated by scavenging vultures and hyenas:

> They [Dingana's men] found that Chaka's body was still intact, but had instead turned as green as moss. They found many animal footprints all around Chaka's body, and they were utterly amazed that even an animal like hyena, which is more greedy than the pig, had not eaten it in the night. ... As they came near, a flight of crows flew away from it [the corpse], and they were sure they would find that they had dug out his eyes. But they found them both intact. A great fear descended upon them all, and *they trembled, and Dingana ordered that the body should be buried quickly lest it should, by some unknown chance, rise again.*
>
> (p.167, my emphasis)

The meaning of the verbal enigma that sounds like a praise name - 'an ox of the vultures' - which announces Chaka's advent into the world, turns out to be that even when Chaka is assassinated and his body abandoned in the veld as carrion for predatory birds

and beasts, he remains inviolate just as no hyenas dared carry him away in the night when he was bound and left to perish as a boy. Although Kunene's interpretation of this incident in his *Thomas Mofolo and the Emergence of Written Sotho Prose* (1989) conforms to Mofolo's overriding creative aim of portraying Chaka as an evil hero completely devoid of any redeeming qualities, it neither substantiates this with textual evidence nor takes cognisance of the cardinal element of the supernatural in African oral epic traditions and tale-form. Kunene's view that 'Mofolo suggests that neither the scavenging hyenas nor vultures would touch his corpse ... out of revulsion' (1989:171) is irreconcilable with the textual evidence and with African oral epic traditions in general. Owing to the work's equivocal structure, this episode could be interpreted in different ways. That Chaka the youth, who is earlier on avoided by hyenas, has not committed any crimes and cannot be said to be tainted morally so as to be rejected by the hyenas out of moral 'revulsion', discounts Kunene's critical formulation. This fantastic ending of the novel may not only be read as a fulfilment of the prophecy that Chaka is 'an ox of the vultures' (p.6), but it could also be perceived as an affirmation of the thesis that the novel is informed and shaped by the supernatural which dominates African oral epic traditions. Perhaps it could also be speculated that Chaka the boy is not attacked by hyenas and the corpse of Chaka the King is not violated because he is mystically perceived by the predatory beasts and birds as one of their kind since he shares an mystic totemic bond with them.

Pre-eminence is another important characteristic of oral epic heroism, assimilated by the novel. Okpewho highlights this epic element when he declares that 'the most noticeable feature of the [epic] hero's image is his preeminence among his fellows' (1975:94). This pre-eminence, the reader is told, could take the form of physical beauty or awe-inspiring bravery. Sundiata has, for example, at the age of ten, all the features of a

supernatural hero destined to conquer and rule nations. His physique puts him above the ordinary rank of the other princes. He is described as 'a lad full of strength; his arms had the strength of ten and his biceps inspired fear in his companions.' The griot declares that Sundiata already 'had that authoritative way of speaking which belongs to those who are destined to command.' Sundiata's pre-eminence among his princely peers is assured when he receives the coveted 'title of *Simbon*, or master hunter, which is only conferred on great hunters who have proved themselves' (Niane, 1965:23). Sundiata outshines all his age-mates and becomes the leader of his peer group. This is a crucial development in the growth of the epic hero.

The growth of Chaka's pre-eminence conforms to African epic traditions. The frequent fights with his fellow herdboys turns him into an awesome warrior. Chaka's inherent epic attributes are further enhanced by the doctoring provided by the medicine woman from Bungane. The immediate outcome of this unusual growth and development is that, like Sundiata, Chaka emerges as the undisputed leader of the herdboys who used to brutalize him. He achieves this feat by beating all his peers into submission. Mofolo's traditional narrator tells us that 'Soon all the herdboys gave up fighting him, and he became their leader.' As a result of this achievement, 'He watered his cattle first in the marshes, and he was the first one to graze where the pastures were rich' (p.15).

The other facet of Chaka's epic heroic pre-eminence among his peers is his handsome physique. Mofolo, playing the role of the traditional bard, meticulously paints Chaka's outstanding good looks. The reader is told that Chaka '... was dark brown in complexion, and was ripe and smooth, rousing admiration in all who saw him ...' (pp.7-8). The narrative voice of glorification asserts that 'From his feet to his head he [Chaka] was without blemish, a truly handsome and dignified man' (p.111). Then the

seductive narrative voice of deglorification takes over and casually adds that Chaka's impressive physique has generated a tradition in which he disrobes himself on various occasions so that his people can view his beautiful body. 'This,' the anti-bardic narrator tells us, 'he did at the request of his "sisters" so that they might feed their eyes on his beautiful body, because Chaka was a strikingly beautiful man.' Even during his installation, Chaka's impressive figure is further portrayed by Mofolo in minute detail (p.85). One gets the distinct impression that concealed beneath this detailed romanticized portrait of Chaka's outstanding good looks, an attribute usually celebrated in oral epic traditions, lurks a veiled rebuke. The comment that on the battlefield wounded soldiers 'about to die, would request the king, as their last wish, to disrobe so that they might admire his body for the last time, and thus die in peace...' (p.111) clearly condemns Chaka's narcissism. What is covertly castigated by Mofolo's anti-traditional discourse is Chaka's inordinate pride in his external attributes - the egomania which finally leads to his establishing a hero-worshipping institution for his own self-deification.

The guise assumed here by Mofolo's narrator is more like that of the *histor*. The insight of Scholes and Kellogg reveals that 'Where the traditional poet [bard] must confine himself to one version of his story, the *histor* can present conflicting versions in his search for the truth, or fact' (1966:242). Mofolo's creative purpose as revealed by the textual analysis of his text is to portray Chaka as an evil hero devoid of any trace of morality. Since Mofolo cannot achieve this aim within the traditional African oral epic tropes and modes which are attuned for the celebration of communal heroes, he revises conventional African epic aesthetics by creating and manipulating ingeniously conflicting narrative viewpoints.

Equally crucial to the epic heroic growth and survival is the hero's ability to invoke supernatural agents to aid him in attaining his vision. Sundiata is instructed at a tender age by his mother, 'the buffalo woman', on the secrets of herbs and sorcery to protect him against his enemies. We are told that 'Sogolon initiated Sundiata into certain secrets and revealed to him the names of the medicinal plants which every hunter knew.' As a result of the teaching by Balla Fasseke and his mother, Sundiata 'got to know all that needed to be known.' The griot tells us that 'Djata [Sundiata] learnt to distinguish between the animals; he knew why the buffalo was his mother's wraith and also why the lion was the protector of his father's family' (Niane, 1965:23). The surface meaning of this narrative structure reveals nothing supernatural. But if we add the battle of wits between Sumanguru, the diabolical Sorcerer King (who uses skins of nine kings he has killed as mats and adorns his secret sorcery chamber with their skulls) then the Mandingo griot's creative intention becomes clear. The epic hero is always cast in a supernatural mould in African oral epics. Sundiata resorts to his knowledge of sorcery to fight the battle of wits with Sumanguru - a battle fought by *two talking magical owls evoked by 'the sorcerer kings'* (Niane, 1965:60, my emphasis).

Mofolo's handling of Chaka's supernatural endowment conforms with the ancient epic tradition. Like Sundiata's mother, Sogolon, Chaka's mother, Nandi takes the initiative in protecting her son from co-wives, half-brothers, and the evil elements of the society bent on his destruction. She engages the services of a woman *inyanga* from Bungane to doctor Chaka. According to the anti-traditional discourse of censure, because of the mystical fortification and the constant fights with herdboys who persistently attack him, Chaka's inherent peaceful disposition is soon replaced by fearlessness and ferociousness (p.12).

The supernatural bravery of the hero - a quality Okpewho describes as the epic hero's 'love of danger and of the din of battle and a contempt for the certainty of death ' (1975:103) - is always celebrated in epics. The importance of the epic hero's martial ferocity is further reinforced by Okpewho's assertion that: '*Love of danger and martial action frequently reaches hysterical, even pathological proportions among several heroes of the African epic*' (1975:101, my emphasis). Sundiata reveals this pathological love of danger and fascination for battles and martial glory, and a disdain for the inevitability of death, when he bursts into laughter on being blocked by the army of Sumanguru's son, Balla Sosso, on his way into Mali. Sundiata contemptuously ignores Balla Sosso as a threat and tells his generals that it requires more than human forces to stop him from his chosen destiny. Mofolo's ingenious manipulation and incorporation of this epic quality into his novel deserves careful examination.

Like the traditional oral artist whose role the author assumes in crafting the novel, Mofolo charts the growth of Chaka's supernatural bravery and love of danger and din of battle in great detail. Chaka's first two acts of supernatural valour are his killing of a lion singlehandedly, after grown-up men have run away, and his killing of the most ravenous wild beast, the hyena which had carried away his brother Mfokazana's girlfriend in the middle of the night. These two marvellous deeds are achieved when he is only a mere uncircumcised boy. Chaka's third act of magical and marvellous courage is his defiance of superstition as depicted by his regular early morning baths in a deep pool reputed to be inhabited by the *tikoloshe* and feared by all:

> This was an ugly place which instilled fear into one even in the daytime, where no one could ever dream of bathing alone, a place fit to be inhabited only by the *tikoloshe*. *Chaka bathed alone in this place simply because he was Chaka*. (p.22, my emphasis)

Chaka's awesome bravery and martial superiority is also demonstrated by his killing of the mad giant who ravages Dingiswayo's kingdom, steals stock and butchers all those who try to stop him. The patterning of these phenomenal acts of valour and service to his community - wondrous feats that deserve celebration and praise singing - sustains the intimation that Chaka and his community are destined for a prodigious future. Mofolo's portrayal of these epic feats of bravery by Chaka conforms to his role of the royal court historian or the *imbongi* which he plays.

Though Mofolo assumes the guise of the traditional African bard in his text, his preoccupation with portraying Chaka as a villain demands a massive revision of the African oral epic traditions. The most fundamental feature of the epic tradition of the Africa oral arts is the *izibongo*, which Mofolo has completely inverted in order to effect his subversion of the collective image of Chaka. African oral epics are often structured around two antithetical discourses. The discourse of glorification is devoted to exalting the image of the epic hero while that of vilification is attuned to denigrating the villains, who are always the epic hero's arch-enemies. At the end of the tale, the villains are normally defeated by the epic hero. Praise songs play a major role in elevating the hero and vilifying the villains.

Mofolo has revised the *izibongo,* which informs and shapes African oral epics and heroic poetry, in order to effect his fictional subversion of the cumulative representation of Chaka and pre-European Africa. The stylistic and thematic importance of the *izibongo* in African epics is highlighted by Harold Scheub in his 'A Review of African Oral Traditions and Literature'. Scheub declares that the African epic is developed within a network of praise songs: 'Weaving through the entirety of the actions of the epic is a panegyric pattern, providing the work's primary

structure' (1985:10). Mofolo achieves his objective by exploiting - with a devastating effect - his ability to repeatedly negate Chaka's prodigious acts of valour, which would traditionally merit praise singing and celebration in African oral epics. The glorified version of Chaka presented by the traditional narrator - the account which lists Chaka's feats of bravery - is subverted by the neo-traditional voice, similar to that of the *histor*, which comments on Chaka's acts of valour by generalizing, moralizing and telling the reader what to think: to envision Chaka as an evil despot. Mofolo's stylistic virtuosity in thus inverting praise singing to vilification accounts for his phenomenal success in portraying Chaka as an epic villain.

One of Chaka's extraordinary acts of courage and martial skill is his single-handed killing of a lion as a boy after grown-up men have beaten a hasty retreat. This act falls within the realm of the epic hero's phenomenal endowment with valour and calls for unrestrained praise. Using a cluster of panegyric rhetoric usually reserved for stringing praise-names together in heroic poetry, the bardic narrator satirizes the cowardly men: 'The men's flight home was like "he-who-has-no-speed-will-be-left-behind" and "don't-pass-*me*-and-I-won't-pass-*you*"...' (p.18). While the traditional voice of rebuke embodied in the two praise songs vilify the villains and the cowardly men, their antithetical component - the voice of glorification - celebrates Chaka's epic heroism. The panegyrical songs generated by the lion killing incident reveal Mofolo's mastery of the African oral traditions. African praise songs are, in consonance with centuries of oral traditions, crafted to achieve antithetical purposes: to glorify the community's heroes while vilifying communal enemies and villains. Mofolo remains faithful to this literary tradition in vilifying the cowardly young men of Ncube's village while praising Chaka.

That the *izibongo*'s two-pronged structure is traditionally crafted into a two-edged stylistic sword to be used for both praising and denigration is confirmed by Russel H. Kaschula. In his doctoral thesis, entitled 'The Transitional Role of the Xhosa Oral Poet in Contemporary South African Society' (1991:17), Kaschula not only shows how the modern *imbongi* manipulates this ethical function of praise singing in castigating contemporary Southern African political figures, who are branded as villains, but he also debunks the power of these powerful politicians in muzzling the *imbongi* for exposing their political crimes.

Mofolo manipulates this stylistic technique in various ways. At a superficial level, the two songs about the lion killing episode eulogize the epic hero. The first song is sung by the young girls who celebrate Chaka's epic bravery and heroism:

> Here at home, at Ncube's, there are no men,
> There is but one young man of worth;
> Here at our home, at Ncube's, there are no men,
> For all the men here are cowards
> They ran away leaving their age-mate in the field,
> Leaving their comrade wrestling with a wild beast,
> Gripping a lion by its jaws.
> ... O, Senzangakhona, come fetch your child and take him home,
> He is a male child, a shield-bearer,
> He will fight for you and conquer your enemies. (p.19)

The surface preoccupation of the girls' song is with idolizing the budding epic hero. This song is faithfully tailored in accordance with the dual functions of praise singing in African oral epic traditions: to shower praises on the epic hero and to denigrate his enemies as social outlaws. The young men of Ncube's village are vilified and dismissed as 'no young men' and 'cowards' who leave 'their age-mate' to fight a wild beast alone. But Chaka, the budding epic hero, is glorified as 'one young man of worth'. On the superficial level, the voice of the traditional bard has carried out his duty faithfully: he has praised the epic hero for his awesome courage. Mofolo's marvellous verbal illusion

thus lures the reader into believing that his aim is to celebrate Chaka's legendary heroism.

However, at a more complex level, the ubiquitous veiled tone of criticism - the anti-bardic narrative voice - continues its work of fictional subversion of Chaka's epic image. This veiled pejorative discourse intimates that Chaka's intrepid act - a patriotic deed which saves the village from the destructive impulses of the ferocious lion - ironically destroys the communal wholeness of the village, thus laying the foundation for Chaka's own ultimate downfall. The bardic narrator's diatribes against the reactions of the men to the praises showered on Chaka by the young girls and Nandi's age-mates reveal this resultant communal discord:

> Those two songs generated a bad feeling among the men and the youths when they realized that the young girls would be attracted towards Chaka and *they* would not receive any more attention...the evil spirit spread until it influenced people like Mfokazana, and all of them plotted to kill Chaka, no matter in how cruel a manner .... (p.20)

By creating this disparity between the traditional voice of praise and the concealed anti-legendary tone bent on subverting the voice of the traditional *imbongi*, Mofolo introduces a dialectical battle between the two versions of Chaka from the very beginning of the novel. The irony of Chaka's life is that his praiseworthy action of killing the lion has achieved the reverse: it has torn the village into two warring factions. This ironic inversion of Chaka's exemplary deed suggests that the anti-traditional discourse queries Chaka's epic image and projects a counter version which portrays Chaka as an epic villain or a trickster hero who deserves vilification. The anti-Zulu discourse, it may be argued, has subjected the Zulu legendary epic hero to a status-reversal.

The second song which is composed by Nandi's age-mates also praises the budding epic hero. But as usual the concealed anti-

traditional voice which is determined to undermine Chaka's image annihilates the element of reverence, leaving behind only a vague feeling of uneasiness:

> True men are gone, we remain with strange beings,
> We remain with men-like beings who are not men!
> *What can we do with Chaka, a mere child?*
> *Women of Ncube's village behold, a wonder!*
> The women of Senzangakhona's house are useless,
> A woman is Nandi, she alone,
> For she has borne a male child in all respects. (p.19. my emphasis)

Though the song exalts Chaka's epic heroic status, one is puzzled by lines three and four - 'What can we do with Chaka, a mere child? / Women of Ncube's village behold, a wonder!'- which appear to engage in antithetical discourse. 'What can we do with Chaka, a mere child?' indirectly questions Chaka's claim to heroic glory while the line, 'Women of Ncube's village behold, a wonder!', presents an unqualified adoration of the image of the epic hero. This verbal struggle shows how Mofolo sustains the novel's equivocation. The analysis of the two songs reveals that while the bardic voice of praise overtly sings the praise of the budding epic hero, a veiled corrosive anti-legendary tone of denunciation undermines the heroic stature of Chaka, thus negating the sense of glorification implied by the songs.

The heroic import of Chaka's second intrepid act - his killing of a hyena which has carried away Mfokazana's girlfriend in the night - is also inverted by the anti-epic discourse. The women as usual shower praises on Chaka and only throw words of rebuke at the cowardly men who are too frightened to help him rescue the girl from the hyena's jaws (p.30). Mofolo's unstated creative purpose appears to subsist in his constantly blending the two counter-discourses: the customary voice of the *imbongi* designed to openly exalt Chaka's image through praise singing and the neo-traditional voice of censure simultaneously fashioned to challenge and subvert that excessive veneration by means of a

sustained concealed denigration which continuously undermines Chaka's stature as an epic hero. We can only assume that Chaka's legendary and heroic grandeur is deliberately inflated by the author for an eventual catastrophic deflation and demolition through the inevitable ascendancy of the anti-traditional voice of deglorification. In his usual ambivalent attitude to Chaka - the ambiguous posture Daniel Kunene (in Burness, 1976) and Burness (1976) call the 'love-hate' dilemma - the anti-bardic narrator declares that *'The people were overwhelmed with joy, even though their joy was mixed with shame'* (p.30). The mixed reactions of the people and the latent equivocal undertone are presented as follows:

> *They asked themselves*, with much astonishment, *how far were Chaka's deeds going to go in their beauty, their nobility and their praise-worthiness. The young also asked themselves, with sadness and shame, how long was Chaka going to continue degrading them,* since their feeling of unworthiness just kept growing. Why, just a few days before he had killed a lion after they had all run away, and now even today he killed a hyena that had run off with a person right from their midst with none of them ready to go to the rescue. The young girls ... went also to sing *songs which would praise Chaka* and *despise Mfokazana*. (pp.30-31, my emphasis)

Textual analysis of the above passage reveals layers of ambiguous meanings. The literal meaning of the first sentence intimates that the people are awed by Chaka's supernatural exploits of daring and are pleased with his heroic achievements. The phrases referring to the 'beauty' of Chaka's deeds and their 'nobility and their praise-worthiness' clearly validate this interpretation. This positive reaction towards Chaka is projected through the perspectives of the *imbongi*. At a more intricate level, however, there is an enigmatic and figurative patterning which negates the surface meaning. This latent signification suggests a feeling of veiled resentment and uneasiness evoked by the expression, 'how far were Chaka's deeds going to go'. It is intimated that the 'marvellous deeds of Chaka' may either undermine the well-being of the society or lead to something

tragic. The second and the third sentences suggest that Chaka's service to the society instead of uniting it has achieved the reverse. It has torn the society in two. This negation of the hero's benevolent deeds can be perceived as an anti-traditional sentiment undermining the growing epic stature of the young hero. The cowardly young men who fail to join Chaka in saving the girl see him as a threat which should be eliminated. The age-mates of the girl saved by Chaka see him as a hero, sing his praises, and condemn Mfokazana and his peers for their inaction and cowardice. Here again we have two different discourses or versions battling for supremacy.

The climax of this episode is Senzangakhona's order to his men to kill Chaka -a command which flows from his deep-seated low opinion of Chaka, whom he has always treated as a renegade. Without attempting to find out from any of the witnesses as to what happened, the Zulu King erroneously assumes that his chosen heir, Prince Mfokazana, who is lying wounded on the ground, was the doer of the heroic feat of killing the hyena and that Chaka had attacked him and his peers out of jealousy. The bardic narrator also suggests rather faintly that, out of fear for his own throne, Senzangakhona deliberately refrains from investigating what had actually happened in order to find an excuse for eliminating his intrepid progeny. The traditional narrator then draws the reader's attention to what Okpewho calls 'a sense of moment' (1975:212) - a stage in which a significant turn of direction occurs in the hero's life. The order for Chaka's death by his own father is so momentous and portentous that instead of the praise songs which have been deployed in the lion and the hyena episodes, the women break into a funeral lamentation. We are told 'The women, Nandi's age-mates, sang a song of grief, a lamentation: they sang crying, with tears flowing down their cheeks, saying':

> Alas! You gods, think of us,
> Look upon us who are killed for a crime that is not there.

Alas! You spirits, you are our witnesses,
Alas! The King is without truth,
He is without truth, he is a chameleon
Even after we have born him a male child,
A male child, conqueror of mighty ones.
Alas! Senzangakhona is afraid of his equals,
And vents his anger upon the defenceless! (p.33)

The symbolic implications of the dirge are difficult to decode. It could either signify the death of filial relationship between Chaka and his father or at a metaphorical level the demise of Chaka's old selfless and patriotic being. Mofolo's traditional narrator, whose attempts to enhance Chaka's epic stature are relentlessly undermined by the anti-epic discourse, presents a positive view of Chaka and maintains that Chaka has not erred in any way. He is, it is insinuated, a helpless and ostracized victim of injustice in a ruthless world. To highlight Chaka's wretched childhood, the reader is jarred again by the traditional omniscient narrator urging him to take note of the horrendous experience of the budding epic hero. Chaka's plight is foregrounded by an epideictic device - a deployment of a string of eulogies traditionally used in praise singing and heroic poetry. We are told that '*...Chaka had indeed become a hare-that-was-struck-on-the-ear, one-without-parents, a buffalo-standing-all-by-itself, because all those who saw him fought him without any reason at all*' (p.34, my emphasis). Despite this apparent narratorial empathy, the narrative structure evokes a veiled premonition that the ferocity of Chaka's self-defence is a harbinger of his future wanton and senseless destruction of human life.

The chilling and gruesome details of Chaka's heroic fight with his half-brothers and their peers underscore the importance of the elements of martial ferocity and horror in epics. The gory details of this 'titanic' fight - the 'smashed skull' of a man whose 'little brain' falls out; the splitting of a man's chin 'apart so that his jaws separated and his tongue' dangling in

space; the crushing of a man's 'head between the eye and the ear,' dislodging his eye from its socket so that it falls 'on the ground a flat mass like the eye of a sheep'; and the wounded Mfokazana lying on the ground with blood flowing from his 'mouth and nose and ears ... like a sheep whose neck had been severed' - all generate a horrendous sense of a demonic slaughter. The macabre - as even a casual textual examination of epics will show - is an important element of epic heroism. The marvellous surface seduction of Mofolo's project - the African epic folktale which appears to be singing the praises of the Zulu legendary hero - is brilliantly demystified by this narrative form. Once again, under the guise of the *imbongi*, Mofolo presents a ferocious display of Chaka's epic martial bravery which, superficially, appears complimentary. Chaka's illusory epic heroic achievement in this incident is, however, quickly dispelled. This dissolution of Chaka's epic heroic image is effected by the displacement of the conventional epic narrator by the *histor*-like narrator who is capable of employing 'a variety of separable perspectives, an attribute we may call his *multifariousness*' (Scholes and Kellogg, 1966:273). The anti-traditional discourse which is embedded deeply within this narrative structure negates Chaka's 'titanic' battle with his brothers and presents a counter version of the fight. The anti-epic narrator achieves this counter-image by ingeniously commenting on the negative attributes of the hero's self-defence and making the reader perceive young Chaka as a potentially violent man. It could be argued that Mofolo's creative aim here is not only to be faithful to the oral epic traditions, but also to expose Chaka's latent bloodthirstiness. What we have here is that the neo-traditional narratorial voice repudiates the destructive martial ferocity which is epitomized by Chaka's bloody self-defence and is celebrated in African legendary tradition because the text revises the criterion for the traditional legendary heroic ideal, and belligerence and wanton destruction of human life are no longer the ideal.

The climax of Chaka's feats of supernatural courage, however, is his epic fight with the mad giant who destroys Dingiswayo's and the villagers' cattle, killing all who try to stop him. The credit due to Chaka for this benevolent service to his community is again neutralized by the anti-traditional narrator who intimates a subtle distinction between Chaka's killing of the lion, the hyena, and his killing of the mad giant. There is a curious suggestion that his killing of the two wild beasts is motivated by a selfless desire to render services to his community whereas his killing of the mad giant is triggered by selfish motives. It is insinuated that his central concern is self-interest: to win the respect of his new community and the favour of King Dingiswayo (p.50). Like the first two patriotic services to his community - the killings of the lion and the hyena - Chaka's killing of the madman in reality draws a veiled condemnation from Mofolo's anti-traditional narrator (pp.50-51).

The most classic example of Mofolo's ingenious exploitation of the stylistic technique of inversion is his portrayal of Chaka's excitement on the eve of his first battle with King Zwide on the third day of his arrival at Dingiswayo's kingdom. A satiric self-reflexive intrusion projected by the anti-legendary discourse declares that '*...Chaka was beside himself with joy, and his hand stopped smarting, because it has been itching like the fangs of a hunting dog which was impatient to go to the hunt*' (p.52, my emphasis). This anti-epic voice deliberately mutes Chaka's heroic exploits and victory over King Zwide, who has all the hallmarks of an epic villain, and instead intensifies the negative aspects of Chaka's martial ferocity and the number of people killed in the battle. We are told that 'On that day *Chaka's arm grew swollen from the work of stabbing and killing*' (p.65, my emphasis). Here again Chaka's phenomenal courage during the battle is overtly condemned by the anti-traditional narrator.

Mofolo's portrayal of Chaka's youth, the period in which Chaka has performed selfless acts of service to the community and has committed no crimes against anyone, thus projects nothing complimentary about Chaka. Though Mofolo plays the role of the traditional court historian or the *imbongi*, he succeeds in presenting Chaka as 'an inverted epic hero' through the uncanny creation and the exploitation of the conflicting narrative voices which create two opposing versions of Chaka's youthful career: the budding epic hero, ineffectually presented by the traditional bardic narrator and the powerful, seductive anti-traditional version, which portrays Chaka as a supernatural but potentially bloodthirsty and violent young hero. There is the persistent intimation that the text questions the art of praise singing because it is perceived as a legacy which isolates the individual for glorification at the expense of the larger community and worse still, generates petty jealousies between the 'heroes' and the non-heroes. This situation, the text suggests, undermines the communal wholeness of the society and turns rulers into megalomaniacs craving flattery and turns their subjects into grovelling masses.

The shift from the veiled subversion of Chaka's heroic stature during the period of his youth to a virulent and overt disfigurement after his installation as chief is revealed in Mofolo's manipulation of praise songs addressed to Chaka, the King. There appears to be a marked change in the narrator's attitude to Chaka after his arrival in Dingiswayo's kingdom. This change of attitude, which is marked by an undisguised narratorial hostility, may be traced to Chaka's meeting with Isanusi:

> 'Mooing bovine, fit to hollow in the royal village, if it bellows in a lesser village it is not fitting ... god with the wet nose, who causes quarrels among the nations!' ...*Bayede*, O King! The cattle of Zululand praise you, they greet you, you who are the heaven that gives rain and pastures. The sheep and goats of Zululand praise you, you to whom they owe existence. All the living creatures of

> Zululand praise you, you who were belched forth by a bovine, who are belched forth by a bovine!' (p.110)

The praise songs addressed to Chaka after his installation are essentially different from the songs dedicated to him when he kills the lion, the hyena and the mad giant. Instead of the antithetical voices of overt exaltation and veiled vilification fighting each other for supremacy, we now have an unambiguous and persistent voice which maintains that praise singing has been institutionalized by King Chaka to satisfy his hunger for flattery and self-deification and his megalomania. In other words, the narratorial conflicting voices of praise and condemnation which have been fighting for dominance in the novel all along have either merged into one or the voice of the traditional bard has been demolished by the amalgam of hostile narrative voices which have relentlessly challenged it since the beginning of the novel. The different discourses in the novel are now only preoccupied with portraying Chaka as a villain without any redeeming virtues. The following abrasive anti-traditional comment, *'Then Chaka's heart would be filled with joy to overflowing when he was being praised even by the animals of the veld'*, (p.110, my emphasis) unveils the anti-epic narrator's increasingly caustic and satiric tone of disparagement designed to undercut Chaka's heroic image. The traditional bardic discourse of exaltation which opens the novel appears to be virtually neutralized. The foregrounded phrase 'being praised *even* by the animals of the veld' debunks the narrator's aim: to portray Chaka as a hero plagued with an inordinate hunger for flattery - an egomania so great that he is even fooled into believing that animals which are not endowed with human speech actually praise him. Chaka, we are told, moves from one section of his royal kraal to the other in the quest of flattery (p.111).

Closely related to Mofolo's inversion of the *izibongo*, epic martial ferocity and bravery, is the author's denunciation of the role of the *imbongi* in traditional Africa. Mofolo's manipulation of praise singing and his caricature of Chaka's council of advisers, who are parodied as impotent, timid and powerless flatterers *(iimbongi)*, emphasizes his sublime vision of the role and the dilemma of the oral bard in the courts or in the service of powerful rulers. By representing Chaka's councillors in this manner, Mofolo projects a subtle indictment of traditional African oral bards and kingship, particularly *izibongo* and the functions of the *imbongi*. Mofolo foresees that the bard will find it impossible to project the truth when he is in the service of powerful rulers. Mofolo exploits Chaka's massacre of the cowards in order to put across his vision of the role of the *imbongi*. The slaughter of warriors, who either have come back without capturing any enemy spears or have returned without their own, is celebrated by the impotent councillors with showers of praise songs. The sycophantic and powerless courtiers lavish praises on Chaka in order save their own lives:

> At that time Chaka was so angry that he was foaming at the mouth; and then the king's courtiers, the men appointed specially to advise the king said : "Ao, how great his wisdom! This deed will ensure that there will never again be any cowards in Zulu's empire! No warrior will ever again turn his back on the enemy! ... How great his understanding! The spears of Zululand will no longer be lost, and the king's efforts will no longer be reduced to naught through people throwing away their spears on purpose as they run away." (pp.130-131)

This passage depicts nothing but the praising of Chaka's actions. However, even a casual comparison of the words of this eulogy with Nandi's and the brave princes's plea to Chaka to have mercy upon the condemned warriors - 'O King, let the lion withdraw its claws and tread on its paws; your spear has killed, it is enough; have mercy on them, great master!' (p.131) - reveals the reverse.

The utter powerlessness of Chaka's advisers, and Mofolo's repudiation of praise singing and what he considers as the abject role of the *imbongi* are emphasized by the courtiers' fawning reaction to Chaka's satanic slaughter of innocent Zulus. We are told that the eyes of those who wept for their dead relatives 'were gouged out' and the tongues of the princes who asked Chaka to have mercy on the cowards 'were pulled out...' (p.133). For this killing of the brave princes and the innocent whose only crime is having wept for their dead relatives, Chaka is praised by his impotent advisers:

> The king's men: "Not since the creation of all the nations has there been a man whose judgements equal those of this one! He testifies by his words, he testifies by his deeds too that he is one sent by Nkulunkulu ... *Syakubonga, siyakudumisa,* Zulu (We thank you, we praise you, O Zulu)! Your judgements are just and they are without favour. Your eyes see deep into peoples's chests, they reveal things which are hidden to others! Your ears hear the plots which are hatched in peoples's hearts! All your deeds testify, O Zulu, that you are no mortal being, but the servant of Nkulunkulu, you are the Heaven which is towering over us all'. (p.133)

By convincing the reader that the praise songs are the work of Chaka's institutionalized structure, designed for his self-deification, the anti-bardic narrator succeeds in presenting the *iimbongi* as spineless court flatterers who sing the praises of their employers either out of fear or for their own selfish personal gains. The novel's suggestion that the *imbongi* has no say in the praise songs he creates and that he has only one goal in life - to 'sing his master's voice' or to glorify his lord in order to survive - is substantiated by a self-conscious narratorial intrusion. This reflexive narrative stamp, which asserts that *'If any one of them had spoken in a manner which did not please Chaka, the penalty would have been death'* (p.133, my emphasis), evokes the viewpoint that courtiers/*iimbongi* are yes-men who are coerced by their powerful masters to deify them. Equally important is how the voice of the histor-like narrator

moralizes and leads the reader to form a negative impression of Chaka.

The constraints of the *imbongi*'s profession, which Mofolo's portrait of Chaka's advisers presents, are brilliantly unveiled by W.M. Kabira in her work *The Oral Artist* (1983). Kabira's insight, 'The oral artist operating in a society dominated by kings, chiefs and priests will, most likely, create a literature that supports the rulers and reflects the ideology of the ruling class' (1983:3) clarifies Mofolo's, Plaatje's, Armah's and Ouologuem's representations of praise singing, hero-worshipping and self-deification.

The perception that the *imbongi* is not free to tell the absolute truth, particularly when the subjects of their songs happen to be powerful kings and notables, is underpinned by Jordan K. Ngubane in his essay 'Shaka's Social, Political and Military Ideas' (in Burness, 1976). Ngubane reveals that 'The great Magolwane ka Jiyana criticized [King] Mpande's weak rule so powerfully that the king ordered his execution' (1976:131). That in actual life the *imbongi* does not enjoy the poetic licence to criticize powerful personages is further confirmed by Kaschula, who reveals how three *iimbongi* were 'arrested and harassed ... during the Dalindyebo-Matanzima dispute concerning independence ... and during the Transkei-Ciskei feud of 1987 and 1988 ...' (1991:17). This observation affirms Mofolo's view in *Chaka* - one which foreshadows the powerlessness of the *imbongi* in contemporary Africa as revealed by Kaschula's research.

Besides his revision of the *izibongo* and caricaturing of the *iimbongi* as servile court flatterers, Mofolo's anti-traditional narrator, who is now in complete control, discredits the dominant African divine concepts of chiefs in order to intensify his fictional sabotage of the collective image of Chaka. Chaka, we are reminded, does not want only to be recognised as king of the

Zulus, but he also craves to be worshipped as an omnipotent and divine king. Chaka is made to create divine praises for himself: 'Bayede, Father, King of heaven! /... You are as great as the sky above' (p.116).

The flamboyant and the hyperbolic thus revealed by the praise songs designed by Chaka for his own self-indulgence shows the stylistic patterning of the panegyric in African epics. According to Chidi Ikonne in his 'Purpose Versus Plot: The Double Vision of Thomas Mofolo's Narrator' (1976), the fact that Mofolo makes Chaka present himself as 'King of heaven' and *Bayede*, which means a demi-god, undermines the hero's tragic dimension. Ikonne argues that '... the idea of making him [Chaka] present himself as "The Little God through whom the Great God rules" tends to negate his very *hubris*, a quality which is almost indispensable to the tragic hero' (1976:57). To Ikonne, this implies that the reader loses his pity and sympathy for the hero because Chaka is now perceived as a superman and no longer a human being. Ikonne concludes that Chaka's extraordinary and supernatural attributes are therefore responsible for his failure to achieve tragic dimension.

Clearly, the supernatural features of Chaka's personality are essential constituents of the oral epic traditions which govern and mould Mofolo's inverted epic portraiture of Chaka. The supernatural attributes conform to the necessary fundamental matrix of African epics - the traditional African divine concepts of chiefs. Chaka's failure to attain full epic and tragic dimensions in the "classical" sense of the concept is not caused by his claim to divine status. His lack of tragic stature is rather effected by the anti-traditional narrator's relentless subversion of the conventional epic heroic growth, which is achieved through a host of creative ploys: the inversion of the African oral epic traditions, the creation and manipulation of conflicting narrative voices, and the deployment of subversive

narratorial intrusions which are tailor-made to sabotage Chaka's legendary status and to shape the reader's mental image of Chaka.

The epic hero, it is suggested, is never an angel. Like all human beings, his multifarious gifts, which could bring benefits to his community, coexist with destructive impulses, that could usher in disaster for himself and his world. The question of how to classify an epic hero whose actions undermine the very community he sets out to save is commented on by the following critics. Joseph Campbell underscores this syndrome of the inherent personal contradictions of the epic hero when he asserts in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* that 'The hero of yesterday becomes the tyrant of tomorrow, unless he sacrifices *himself* today' (1956:353). Charles Bird endorses this view. In his *The Song Seydou Camara, Volume One: Kambili*, Bird says:

> The [epic] hero is asocial, capable of unrestricted cruelty and destructiveness, whose presence is always a threat to the stability of the collectivity. He is, however, perhaps the only member associated with the group who is capable of swift and conclusive action.
>
> (Bird, 1974:vii)

Bird's comment not only echoes Chaka's character traits which Mofolo criticizes but it also shows that Mofolo's mastery of the African oral arts is phenomenal. Okpewho's trenchant comment takes the issue further when he declares that 'Such then is the ambiguity of his epic heroic personality: he is both killer and savior, rebellious and cooperative, reflecting the varied potential in society' (1975:132-133).

Mofolo's representation of the concept of divine kingship is not reconcilable with the collective Black notions of the sacredness of African kingship. The views of two West African ethnographers, A.K. Busia and J.B. Danquah, confirm the traditional African beliefs in the divinity of chiefs. Danquah's opinion, expressed in 'Autopsy of Old Ashanti' (1952), his review of A.K. Busia's

The Position of the Chief in Modern Political System of Ashanti (1951), not only sanctions Busia's thesis on the Akan divine concepts of chiefs, but it also confirms Black African beliefs in the divine powers of chiefs. Danquah declares that 'The chief was custodian of the ancestral land' and his 'highest duty in the tribe was to give veneration to this living reality' (1952:136). Danquah further crystallizes the notion of the divine powers of African kings when he asserts that 'The sacred nature of the chief's office is a characteristic feature of chiefship ...' (1952:137).

Mazisi Kunene's comment in his 'The Relevance of African Cosmological Systems to African Literature Today' (1980) on the Egyptian King Akhenaton's claim to divine lineage unveils how ancient the African concepts of the divinity of chiefs are and how Mofolo's revision of these discredits the image of Chaka:

> I believe for instance, that when King Akhenaton of Egypt advocated a monotheistic system, with himself as the only son of the Great Sun-God, Ra, he was expressing a growing departure among the aristocracy from the African communal ethic into the individualistic, rigid, feudal structure. King Akhenaton was not expressing a belief in one God (which in any case was held by many African peoples) but rather a belief in himself as the sole depository of power both secular and supernatural.
>
> (Mazisi Kunene, 1980:204)

Though Chaka's political system cannot be described as a feudal structure, King Akhenaton's and Chaka's fundamental political visions and aims appear to be very similar: to achieve supreme secular and spiritual power. The political strategy which has mesmerized successive African rulers dating from ancient times to the present is a political dogma through which they have always managed to immortalize themselves as divine potentates in order to achieve both supreme spiritual and secular power. This political amalgam of stratagem and self-deification had, in the past, enabled the ancient kings of Africa and continues to make it possible for modern African leaders to impose tyrannical rule

on their peoples. The process appears to have developed in historical progression: from the pre-dynastic political system to 'humane kingship' and ultimately to what Robin Horton (1971:109) calls in his essay 'Stateless Societies in the History of West Africa' (in J.F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder eds., 1971:109) 'the more full-blooded kind of "divine kingship"' - the stage in which African kings projected themselves 'as vehicles of deities and ancestral spirits'. Horton concludes that this self-created divine aura is 'a political device' which was designed by kings intent upon achieving political supremacy and compelling absolute obedience from the ruled. This trend has led to an establishment of a long tradition of tyrannical kingship culture, which has come under severe attack in modern black literature.

The historical Shaka and Mofolo's Chaka have both been said to have replaced the traditional council of independent chiefs with the army generals and commanders they have created themselves. Since both the fictional Chaka and the historical Shaka can dismiss their own created councillors whenever they want, the system amounts to the establishment of supreme secular power which operates above the traditional laws of the Zulus. Just as Chaka draws on the ancient concept of divine kingship as epitomized by the Ancient Egyptian King Akhenaton's claim to divine lineage in order to perpetuate his supreme power and operate above the ordinary customs of the Zulus, modern African politicians exploit the flamboyant and hyperbolic warrior-kingship rituals of pre-colonial Africa in order to create godlike self-images and high-sounding praise names in declaring themselves 'life presidents'. Chaka's projection of himself as *Bayede*, the demi-god or the intermediary between *Nkulunkulu* and men, therefore, is a graphic illustration of this propensity. Mofolo's anti-legendary narrator has isolated the divine attribute of African kingship rituals in order to castigate Chaka for his self-deification which is characterized by his linking

his destiny to that of cosmic bodies and deities - an act which amounts to a claim to divine omnipotence. The anti-bardic narrative voice repudiates Chaka for departing from the humane and low-keyed kingship traditions and giving himself a divine status - a sacrilege against *Nkulunkulu*. But the notion of irreverence in this context is Christian and is not reconcilable with that of traditional African religion.

Mofolo's anti-traditional narrator's reaction to Chaka's claim to supreme secular and spiritual power is revealed in his malignant anti-traditional censure after Chaka has renamed his Kingdom "Amazulu" ("the sky, people of the sky"). Since both the recorded and the oral history of the Zulus unequivocally proves that the name 'Zulu' was in existence long before Chaka was born, it may be assumed that this is another creative ploy designed by Mofolo to intensify his network of vilification of the legendary image of Chaka:

> All of them laughed once more, greatly surprised; and we too are surprised and wonder how great were the desires and the impudence in
> the heart of this Mokone that he compared himself to the greatness of the heavens! (p.103)

Mofolo's anti-bardic narrator's satirical comment not only infringes on African oral epic traditions, but also subverts the sacred notion of African kingship. The Mandingo griot's manipulation of the solar image in Niane's *Sundiata* shows that megalomania, vain-glory, and divine omnipotence are not only epic heroic attributes but also the sacredness of chieftaincy. The anti-epic discourse deliberately disparages these attributes in order to divest Chaka of his false fabled image while also undercutting that of the Zulus. The anti-traditional narrator even criticizes the weakness of traditional African people's uncritical veneration of kings:

> We have already mentioned that Chaka, while he was still at his home, *was the subject of evil gossip*, and was said to be someone who was not quite like other human beings, and

> *that he had been sired by a tikoloshe, an evil genie,* and that that was why Senzangakhona chased him away together with his mother. *Now that he was king, the people once again began to talk about him, but this time they were saying beautiful things.* The beauty of his face, and his impressive tall stature, and his heart that was afraid of nothing, as well as the manner in which he marshalled the armies in war - these things were taken as an indication *that Chaka had been sent by the gods* among the people; it was said *that the heart that was in Chaka, and the spirit that was in him, were not those of ordinary mortals, but were the heart and the spirit of Nkulunkulu himself.* (p.103, my emphasis)

Since the anti-traditional narrator does not suggest any reason why Chaka is praised and given divine status except that he is now a king, we are compelled to draw one basic conclusion: that kingship confers honour and dignity and that even a villain can become a subject of veneration simply by wearing the garb of royalty. The text eloquently sustains the view that the degree of Chaka's villainy and lack of tragic dimension flow from the anti-legendary narrator's success in shaping the reader's negative construct of Chaka, and not from Chaka's claim to divine eminence. Obumselu shows how the structural difference between Niane's *Sundiata* and Mofolo's *Chaka* is determined by the conflicting creative aims of the two artists: 'If *Sundiata* is a narrative equivalent of a praise poem, *Chaka* is an exorcist's incantation' (1975:33). The historical comment made in Omer-Cooper's *The Zulu Aftermath* (1966:16-17) about Bantu beliefs in the divine authority of kings, and Fage's allusion to the divine powers exercised by the kings of Ancient Ghana in his *A History of Africa* (1978:57) confirm the thesis that Chaka's vision of himself as a messenger of *Nkulunkulu* is not un-traditional since it re-enacts an existing timeless tradition of the sacredness of the institution of kingship in Africa. The concept of the divine powers of kings is not only upheld in Africa, for it is also revered in both Asia and Europe. Samuel Noah Kramer confirms this view when he says in his *Cradle of Civilization* (1967) that Kings, '... like Greece's Alexander the Great and Persia's Shapur

II, actually considered themselves to be gods; others, like the legendary King Arthur, thought merely to be vicars of the Lord; France's absolutist Louis X1V saw kings "occupying, so to speak, the place of God"' (1967:169). The Zulu king's claim to divine omnipotence is, therefore, not so abnormal. The narrator appears to extend the criticism of Chaka's self-deification to Africa's seduction by the supernatural: the propensity which induces African rulers to clothe themselves in pseudo-spiritual and legendary image in order to enhance their political power. Mofolo's *Chaka* also indicts the naivete of the masses of traditional Africa who cannot see through the veil of political subterfuge of the tyrannical warrior kings. This theme of the metaphysical blindness of the ruled is elaborately treated in Armah's and Ouologuem's works selected for this study.

Besides Mofolo's anti-traditional narrator's rejection of Chaka's claim to divine omnipotence is his negative attitude to the African occult arts. The notions of African cabalistic and religious practices are also demystified by Kofi Awoonor. In his doctoral thesis entitled *A Study of the Influences of Oral Literature on the Contemporary Literature of Africa* (1972), in which he celebrates the cumulative concepts of African occultism and religion, Awoonor asserts that the 'Gods [traditional African gods] have both a good and bad nature, and man, through the intervention of magic and talismanic influences and herbs, can invoke their innate benevolent essence' (1972:13). Mofolo's representation of the African occult arts vehemently discounts the collective Black notions of African mysticism. The author's manipulation of the mystical inoculation of Chaka - a facet of African occult arts, which is still practised in modern Africa - amounts to a rejection of the collective Black image of pre-European Africa and modern traditional Africa. Mofolo's literary subversive intention is revealed by the narrator's shift from the empathetic narrative voice, which has been grooming Chaka for epic glory, to the corrosive voice of vilification. Instead of

the tone of celebration, the voice of disfigurement (though muffled at this stage) intimates that the doctoring Chaka has received from the Bungane medicine woman has initiated a process which might transform him into something irrevocably evil. Chaka, it is insinuated, is transformed into a ferocious being who 'had an uncontrollable desire to fight' and to shed blood. The dissenting discourse which challenges the anti-traditional narrative voice right from the beginning of the tale has been neutralized. The anti-traditional narrator which has now become the supreme narrative voice overtly discounts the epic heroic attributes of martial ferocity and the craving for war.

This anti-epic voice suggests that Chaka's aggressiveness and pathological love of danger, battle and disdain for the certainty of death (Okpewho, 1975:103) are symptoms of his gradual descent into a moral abyss. The reader is told that '... whenever he [Chaka] saw a man carrying a stick or a spear his whole body at once began to itch, and he would wish to engage that man in a fight'. The narratorial voice of disfigurement then intrudes and draws the reader's attention to the difference between the old Chaka and 'the bestial being' "*which*" has replaced the humane character after the doctoring. 'Even before that Chaka was a very brave person,' the omniscient anti-traditional narrator continues to shape our vision of him, 'but he had never been the one to provoke a fight, and he was not quarrelsome, *but now these medicines spurred him on and he went to the pastures in defiance of his grandmother's orders*' (pp.14-15, my emphasis). The germs of evil which will eventually exorcise the humanity in Chaka, it is hinted, have been implanted into him by the Bungane *inyanga's* mystical 'fortification'.

The coda to Mofolo's intended purpose is, however, yet to come. And it dawns, as usual, in the form of narratorial imposition loaded with caustic denunciation:

> Always at the end of a fight he would feel a sense of happiness, and experience a wonderful feeling of relaxation, like a poisonous snake which, after biting a person, lies sick until that person dies, whereupon it casts its skin and begins to move about again. (p.15)

This narratorial interruption dispels any illusion about Mofolo's creative purpose: whatever his unstated aim is, it does not include celebration of traditional Africa and the Zulu legendary king. Chaka has become a *'poisonous snake'* who experiences sadistic ecstasy after the deaths of his victims. The communal gratitude generated by Chaka's services to his society appears to be completely negated by this biting denigration of the heroic status of the budding epic hero even though at this stage he has not committed any crime against his society to merit such repudiation.

The use of the African occult arts and traditional medicines for magnifying strength, bravery and transmitting supernatural powers is an ancient African tradition which is still widely practised today all over Africa, and Mofolo was, no doubt, aware of this. The mystical inoculation Chaka was given, therefore, cannot, within the African cultural matrix, be interpreted as a violation of any traditional African taboos. It can only be condemned within the European Christian ethics. Here again we have a rather enigmatic situation: a narrative structure which has all the hallmarks of African folklore, but whose interpretative pieces cannot be slotted into the aesthetic grooves of African traditional literature. It could, however, be contended that the narrator's negative attitude to the occult arts stems, perhaps, from the fact that the supernatural image manipulated by kings to perpetuate their tyranny is often based on 'pseudo-magical' powers believed to have been generated by mystical inoculations and occult practices. The intention of the narrator, therefore, is to condemn these cabalistic practices which have become instruments of maximizing absolute rule in Africa. Thus, Mofolo's

"anti-epic" hero is largely perceived through the perspective of European and Christian ethos.

The Deep Pool episode in *Chaka* unveils another complex dimension of the conflict between traditional African beliefs and European culture. A large corpus of conflicting critical evaluations has emerged concerning Chaka's encounter with 'the King of the Deep Pool'. In this intricate and enigmatic narrative structure, loaded with symbolism, the fantastic overshadows the realistic mode. We are told that as the monstrous snake approaches Chaka for the second time, the frightened budding epic hero holds 'the tuft of [his] hair where the strong medicine' inoculated into his head is located in accordance with the instructions from the Bungane medicine woman. The reader is told that as the monster reaches Chaka:

> It stuck out its tongues and wrapped them around his neck, and they crossed at the back of his head and came to join again in front. Then, supporting its weight on him, it drew itself out and coiled itself around his entire body, and it unwound its tongues and started licking him from the head right down to the soles of his feet. When it finished, it raised its head to the level of his face and it looked at him at close range, and its hot, stinking breath engulfed him. Once again it licked him thoroughly all over his face, and then it returned into the water backwards, keeping a steady gaze on his face. (pp.23-24)

Throughout this fabulous encounter between 'the King of the Deep Pool' and Chaka, Mofolo pushes the reader farther into dark and mysterious caverns of the supernatural in African traditional religion and occultism. The novel's ethnographic introductory paragraph on traditional African mystical beliefs, which presents snakes as messengers of ancestral spirits, may be taken as a creative reading map designed to help the reader decipher this episode. In that opening statement Mofolo, under the guise of the traditional chronicler or the court historian, intent upon locating his tale, enlightens the reader on the African supernatural beliefs:

> Water serpents are highly regarded in Bokone, and so indeed, are such little crawlers as cobra and the puff-adder. A person who has seen a snake is considered to have seen something portentous which presages either good fortune or extreme bad luck accompanied by plagues that are coming to him from his ancestral gods. A snake is not to be killed in Bokone, and anyone who kills it is considered to have done a deed that surpasses all others in its ugliness. Such a one will carry for the rest of his life the shame of having killed that snake. *He who kills a snake is regarded as insulting the gods and showing them disrespect by killing their messenger because, in Bokone, a snake is a recognized messenger who conveys the wishes of the dead to the living descendants.* (p.2, my emphasis)

It is important to observe that the anti-traditional narrator makes no attempt to shape the reader's construct of this clinical narrative through his customary moralizing commentaries. We can only assume that this is purely factual information designed to inform the reader about the African supernatural beliefs in snakes. Mofolo provides linguistic signposts to help the reader unravel his enigmatic narrative structure of the Deep Pool Monster episode. A number of interpretations can be extracted from this incident. Though Obumselu's reading of this episode lacks depth, his observation endorses my reading:

> Though Shaka's experience in the river is Gothic in its outline, it is not unnaturalistic .... It is an event which in the culture is believed to occur from time to time to the spiritual elite. The *tikoloshe* itself and the setting in which it appears come from traditional folklore....
> (Obumselu, 1975:39)

First of all, the episode intimates that Chaka has been chosen by his ancestral spirits for an important destiny. In his *The Africa Image*, Ezekiel Mphahlele, who alludes to the novel's Faustian and Shakespearean themes, also perceives the text's equivocal structure and recognises its intrinsic African background. Mphahlele declares unambiguously that 'This [the Monster] is the messenger of the ancestors which is to assure Chaka that his career deserves their watchfulness and assistance' (1962:206-208). In traditional African cosmology, since ancestors

live in the spirit world, they are nearer to the Creator than their living descendants. Mazisi Kunene confirms this insight when he points out that 'The Creator has delegated his powers to his agents who include the gods, the holy men, the visionaries and all the specially gifted people' (1980:195).

The Zulu King is, undoubtedly, a visionary and a multi-gifted hero. The licking of Chaka from the sole of his feet to his face and the coiling of the snake around his body could either be considered a ritual purification of the budding hero, an honour identifying Chaka as an ancestral nominee for a prodigious destiny or a transmission of mystical and supernatural powers to him. This mysterious event is also a form of initiation ceremony - a ritual and mystical test designed to measure the hero's essential phenomenal epic valour. This view is reinforced by the fact that when Chaka initially becomes too frightened to confront 'the Monster of the Deep Pool', which, the Mofolo's bardic narrator maintains, is a messenger from the ancestors, and closes his eyes - an act which amounts to lack of epic valour and a repudiation of the phenomenon - the Monster goes back into the depth of the river. And when it finally comes back, initiates the purification ritual, and confers mystical powers on Chaka, it keeps its gaze locked with Chaka's as it retreats backwards into the depth of the pool as if to test him to the last moment.

Daniel Kunene's interpretation of this episode is closer to the thrust of this chapter. Kunene asserts that Chaka's monthly ritual baths can be read 'on several levels'. The first of these is that they are 'a ritual process of purification'. Grounding his view on traditional African mysticism, Kunene says: 'In order that Chaka should be able to withstand and repulse the onslaughts against him, he must maintain the highest level of purity from effects of evil medicines and evil tricks of other people.' My reading of this scene is further confirmed by Kunene's critical formulation which argues that the episode can 'be interpreted as

a test of Chaka's "strength of the liver", his courage.' Kunene asserts that 'Chaka has to conquer his fear, otherwise the Monster will have nothing to do with him' (1989:111-112). The ambiguity embodied in the antithesis of evil and good in African traditional religion, occult arts and the Judeo-Christian mythology of Satan and God or heaven and hell, has made it possible for the novel to be read both as a Christian work and as a traditional African folktale. The complexity and equivocation of narrative patterning is further compounded by strange voices which speak to Chaka and are not heard by Nandi who only sees the *tikoloshe*. The first voice tells Chaka that he has been selected to rule over nations and their kings and that he has been honoured to see the Monster of the Deep Pool. The second voice says that the land belongs to Chaka. However, the assurance of Chaka's prodigious future career is overshadowed by an ominous and cryptic warning: 'Yet you must go by the right path' (p.24).

This convoluted narrative structure which is compounded by a puzzling juxtaposition of conflicting narrative voices is controlled by two opposing narrators: the traditional bardic narrator devoted to praising Chaka and the anti-epic narrator, concerned with subverting the hero's epic growth. The traditional narrator's intrusion provides a key for unravelling this narrative puzzle. It is asserted that 'Chaka only heard the words but did not see anything ....' The crucial traditional narrative voice says that 'Nandi did not hear these words, ... which is strange since she was not so far away. *We can only conclude that they were meant for Chaka alone*' (pp.24-25, my emphasis). In his usual equivocal narrative configuration, Mofolo employs foregrounding to draw the reader's attention to the enigmatic and the deeper essence of the passage. Nandi, it is deliberately emphasized, is quite near but does not hear the voices. Then the intrusive bardic narrator intensifies the reader's discomfiture by adding that Nandi has not heard the voices because they are

not meant for her. This has led Chidi Ikonne to conclude that 'the voices from the reeds are clearly the "voice" of Chaka's consciousness' (1976:59). The novel's dual structural configurations make such a critical formulation plausible. Ikonne's interpretation, however, is irreconcilable with traditional African religious and mystical beliefs and practices, which customarily demand that only the gifted visionaries chosen by the ancestral spirits and tuned to the spirit world have access to the mystical messages and visions from the ancestral spirits and traditional deities.

Mofolo continues his innovative manipulation of African epic traditions with a brilliant adaptation of the concept of 'helper' characters, who aid the epic hero in the attainment of his destiny. Chaka has his three 'helpers' just like Sundiata, who has his three important 'helpers': his brother and sister, Manding Bory and Nana Triban, and Balla Fasseke, his griot (Niane, 1965:23-24). In *Sundiata* Sumanguru's final defeat becomes possible only because the 'helper' characters are able to unearth the secret magical antidote of the arch-enemy's supreme magical powers - his vulnerability to an 'arrow with a cock's spur' (Niane, 1965:65). That Sundiata and his 'helpers' have to be versed in the occult arts and sorcery in order to ensure the fulfilment of the hero's destiny further underpins the importance of Black cabalism in African epics. The pattern sketched is not only similar to Chaka's rites of passage, but also throws a penetrating light on Mofolo's ingenious manipulation of witchcraft, Black occultism and the unique adaptation of 'helper' characters: Isanusi, Ndlebe and Malunga.

Mofolo's imaginative use of 'helper' characters, who become externalized attributes of the epic hero's invisible traits, deserves closer scrutiny. His inventive creation of Isanusi, Malunga and Ndlebe emerges as the novel's most pervasive symbolic backcloth, generating a large body of conflicting critical views.

This innovative adaptation of the African epic hero's 'helper' characters is brilliantly explicated by Scheub (1985:14):

> These external characters have become something more than simply a brother saving his sister from ogres as in the tale. Now they define and shape the heroic character. The principle of helper remains stable, an external force assisting the central character in some way; it has moved to another level of complexity. The adapted helper may be the adjunct of the epic's move to psychological realism, as characters in the epic come to be seen as manifestations of traits of the major character. In the Mwindo epic, the hero moves between the extremes of his own character as he swings physically from Shemwindo to Iyangura. Thomas Mofolo uses this device with extraordinary effect in *Chaka (1925)*, in which the central character struggles between the Isanusi and Noliwa/Nandi parts of his nature.

In his exegesis of Mofolo's ingenious exploitation of 'helper characters' Scheub asserts that Mofolo's adaptation is a 'move to psychological realism'. Scheub's psychological interpretation of the Isanusi aspects as visible entities of Chaka's invisible attributes is corroborated by several critics. The first of these is Armah (1976).

Armah declares that 'Faced with the problem of explaining highly complicated internal psychological forces, Mofolo uses his favourite artistic device: he externalizes these internal forces'. Malunga and Ndlebe 'are', Armah sums up, 'facets of Chaka's genius' (1976:12). Ikonne posits that 'there are two principal ways of looking at *Chaka* even as a fiction'. These are either to 'accept the characters and their actions at their face value' or 'to recognize some of the characters as *visible symbols of invisible aspects of Chaka's own nature*' (1976:54, my emphasis). Ikonne concludes that '... this externalization of a man's motives to the extent of making them live and move and have their being in reality is, of course, an index of the virtuosity of Thomas Mofolo's narrator' (1976:56). The view that Isanusi, Malunga, and Ndlebe are external manifestations of Chaka's invisible attributes is also sanctioned by Daniel Kunene. Kunene

declares that 'It is one of the greatest testimonies of Mofolo's artistic genius that as this change ['the continuing metamorphosis of his personality and general philosophy of life'] grows and becomes more manifest, he makes it take the shape of a man, the Isanusi' (1989:113).

A host of other critics, including Ezekiel Mphahlele (1962:208), Donald Burness (1976:11) and Albert S. Gerard (1971:120-121)[9] endorse this psychological interpretation of the Isanusi parts of the novel which are discounted by Eurocentric critics, Black and white. According to Obumselu, who recommends an Afrocentric approach as an alternative way of looking at the text, 'The psychological interpretation of Isanusi, Ndlebe and Malunga has the effect of collapsing the tiered system of the religious world picture unto a single plane, an inevitable critical procedure in a sceptical age but quite invalid for either the Sotho writer or his Christian sponsors' (1975:42). The most vocal critic among those who reject the psychological interpretation of the Isanusi parts of the novel is Wright. Wright's critical view on this is expressed as follows (1985:44):

> Armah's modernizing interpretation of Mofolo gets around this obstacle by psychologising, and thus divesting of their magical power, two of Mofolo's inventions : the giant Malunga and the dwarf Ndlebe, whom Armah, incidentally, mixes up. In Armah's account, these two become allegorical externalisations of "highly complicated internal psychological forces ... they are facets of Chaka's genius".[10]

This rejection of Armah's representation of Isanusi, Ndlebe and Malunga as external manifestations of Chaka's inordinate ambitions and feelings arises from the fact that Wright perceives the work as a Christian text grounded essentially on 'Christian compromises' (1985:42). Wright creates the impression that only Armah discerns the Isanusi parts as invisible traits of Chaka's egomania and martial ferocity. But the above review of the current Black and European critical views on this debate

invalidates Wright's viewpoint. To substantiate his thesis, Wright evokes extra-textual evidence: that Armah humanizes Isanusi because of his selfish motives in using Isanusi as 'a seer and a diviner' in *Two Thousand Seasons*. This rather contrived interpretation robs his critique of credence. Malaba also grounds his interpretation of the Isanusi parts on Christian ethics, bracketing out the traditional African matrix. Malaba describes Isanusi, Ndlebe and Malunga as 'the hellish trinity' - 'a triumvirate that appears in other, derivative, literature...' (1989:61) - a determined attempt to ground his reading on Christian metaphysics.

Another area of conflict between the current body of existing criticism and this chapter's thrust is the Faust theme. There is the persistent belief that the Faustian tale of the good man who sells his spiritual being to the evil spirits for earthly wealth, wisdom and power, is essentially European. A classic example of this view is Ogungbesan's pro-Christian reading of *Chaka* and his formulation of the Faust theme. Ogungbesan claims that Isanusi's 'role was to play Mephistopheles to his African Faust' (1974/1975:86). Mphahlele also alludes to the Faustian theme in his interpretation of the text when he says that 'Although it is not likely that Mofolo was acquainted with Christopher Marlowe, *Chaka* is an interesting mixture of Tamburlaine and Dr Faustus' (1962:206-207). Besides the above comments on the Faustian theme, Burness also declares that since Mofolo was 'a believing Christian, ... it is safe to assume that Isanusi is a devil-figure, destined to tempt the souls of all who abandon faith in virtue.' Isanusi, Burness continues, 'is an African Mephistopheles' (1976:10-11). Isanusi is also perceived by Wright as a diabolical magician endowed with 'satanic temper and.... Mephistophilean interiority' (1985:44). In his 'Early South African Black Writing', Tim Couzens asserts that *Chaka* is a blend of European models (the influence, for instance, of *Macbeth* and *Doctor Faustus* is clear) and African forms, for example, praise

songs'. The critic concludes that 'Particularly effective is Mofolo's creation of the character Isanusi, a Mephistopheles-like witchdoctor' (1975:4, in eds. Bruce King and Kolawole Ogungbesan).

One may question, however, the general view which perceives the sale of one's spiritual being for earthly possessions as being an essentially European (Faustian) theme. Daniel Kunene, the authority on Thomas Mofolo, suggests that the African background and the dual structure of the novel warrant an alternative reading of *Chaka* contrary to the Christian and Faustian interpretations:

> Chaka murdered Noliwa in a manner similar to *diretlo* so that some part of her body might become an ingredient in Chaka's medicines of power and renown, so does Isanusi now demand "some part" of Chaka's spiritual being to add to his (Isanusi's) trophies. So that, after Noliwa's death, Isanusi had conquered, and it was just a matter of time before he came to demand that which already belonged to him.
>
> (Daniel Kunene, 1989:126)

Kunene's view, which reinforces my reading of the text, contends that, besides the Christian and Faustian interpretations, an alternative interpretation of *Chaka* can be elicited by viewing the text through the perspective of the traditional African matrix. The Faustian perception does not take cognisance of the novel's enigmatic framework which provides contrary textual evidence which substantiates an Afrocentric interpretation of the theme of a good man who barters his spiritual being for worldly material wealth, intellect, power and success. The novel's dual vision creates conflicting evidence which substantiates both the Faustian theme and the Afrocentric interpretation based on the African folklore which is fed by the practices of African witchcraft and sorcery. The occult arts and witchcraft, which are still practised in modern Africa, teem with the theme of selling one's own spiritual being or the spiritual beings of loved ones for earthly possessions.

This interpretation is further validated by Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986:80-81, my emphasis):

> For a long time I had been intrigued by the Faust theme in literature. The theme reappears in several works of European literature : Marlowe's *[Doctor] Faustus*, Goethe's *Faust*, Thomas Mann's *Dr Faustus* and Bugakov's *Master* and *Margarita*. But I always suspected that *the story of the good man who surrenders his soul to the evil spirit for immediate earthly gains of wealth, intellect and power was universal and was rooted in the lores of the peasantry.* Elements of it are to be found in many national traditions. *Owuor Anyumba*, a colleague in the Department of Literature who had done immense work on oral literature of different nationalities in Kenya, *had told me instances of this in a number of stories involving sorcerers.*

Ngugi's insight confirms the view that what has always been regarded as the *Faust theme* is a universal theme 'rooted in the lores of the peasantry' (Ngugi, 1986:81). A reaffirmation of this critical observation is provided by the Gikuyu mythic tale of Nding'uri as featured in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Devil On the Cross* (1982:60-66). Nding'uri is a man who owns little property, but has 'a soul that was richly endowed'. As a result of an outbreak of 'a strange pestilence' in the village, Nding'uri loses everything. In desperation, he goes to a cave where evil spirits dwell and signs a pact with one of the evil spirits 'in the shape of an ogre' (Ngugi, 1982:64). In accordance with the terms of the pact Nding'uri surrenders his soul to the evil spirit in return for earthly possessions and worldly power. Like Chaka who kills Noliwa in order to attain supreme kingship, Nding'uri kills the son he loves most. The evil spirit ordered Nding'uri: 'when you reach home *seize the child you love most, pierce one of his veins in the neck, drink up all his blood until his body is completely dry, cook the body, eat the flesh. Nding'uri, I have turned you into an eater of human flesh and a drinker of human blood'* (Ngugi, 1982:64, my emphasis). After Nding'uri has followed the above instructions to the letter, he becomes excessively rich. The hyperbolic narrative patterning which accentuates Nding'uri's

wealth and the degree of his moral decline echoes the zenith of Chaka's phenomenal rise to power as he simultaneously descends into abysmal moral decay:

> Listen: from today onwards you'll never be able to see the beauty of your children, or of your women, or of any other human being. You'll be able to see only the beauty of property .... Devour other people's shadows. That's the task I have given you until the day I come to fetch you.
>
> "From that day on Nding'uri began *to fart property, to shit property, to sneeze property, to scratch property, to laugh property, to think property, to dream property, to talk property, to sweat property, to piss property*".
>
> "Nding'uri's character and behaviour altered. He became mean. He became cruel .... When he sees another man's property, his mouth waters ....'
>
> (Ngugi, 1982:64, my emphasis)

The similarity between Ngugi's myth and Chaka's rites of passage, coupled with their identical evil transformations, reinforces the view that the Faust theme, which is usually considered to be essentially European, subsists within traditional African occult arts and folklore as well. Nding'uri's evil transmutation mirrors Mofolo's fictional portrayal of Chaka - the tale of how a community-oriented child-hero persecuted by the society and hunted by his father's hired assassins barters his spiritual being, life and humanity for absolute power.

The climactic and the momentous stage in Chaka's descent into the moral void is his killing of Noliwa[11], the enchanting Princess and the sister of King Dingiswayo, who is betrothed to Chaka. Mofolo's portrait of this fictional character suggests that she is not only the symbol of celestial purity and sublime perfection of womanhood, but also the externalised representation of Chaka's potential humane attributes. This view is confirmed by Mofolo's hyperbolic and highly romanticized portrayal of Noliwa's supernatural beauty and innocence. The reader is told that 'her beauty had kept growing, and was truly like the beauty of a woman who was beloved by *Nkulunkulu* [God] and was chosen by him to come and demonstrate to the people the very perfection of womanhood'

(p.126). Her murder signifies Chaka's destruction of his own humanity and the surrender of his spiritual being to the forces of evil. Like Nding'uri, the hero in Ngugi's mythical tale in *The Devil On the Cross* (1982), Chaka's murder of Noliwa has turned him into 'a veritable wild beast' or an evil ogre which experiences ecstasy through bloodletting.

The metamorphosis Chaka undergoes on killing the highly idealized Noliwa, the anti-traditional narrator intimates, reveals how deep he has sunk into a moral abyss and how he has reached a point of no-return. We are told that, as a result, Chaka's humanity is permanently shattered: 'As Noliwa died, Chaka felt something inside him, in his chest, something falling down like a heavy stone, and settling heavily on his heart' (p.127). As if this enigmatic commentary is not enough, the anti-bardic narrative voice adds:

> After Noliwa's death Chaka underwent a frightful change both in his external appearance and also in his inner being, in his very heart; and so did his aims and his deeds. First, the last spark of humanity still remaining in him was utterly and finally extinguished in the terrible darkness of his heart; his ability to distinguish between war and wanton killing or murder vanished without trace, so that all these things were the same, and he regarded them in the same light. Second, *his human nature died totally and irretrievably*, and *a beast-like nature took possession of him; ...* But *a man who had spilt the blood of someone like Noliwa, would understandably regard the blood of his subjects exactly as if it were no different from that of mere animals which we slaughter at will.* (pp.127-128, my emphasis)

Chaka's transformation mirrors Nding'uri's transmutation after he has pierced the vein in the neck of his favourite son, drunk his son's blood until the corpse is dry, cooked the body and eaten it. It is no surprise that Chaka commits his first senseless act of butchery after Noliwa's murder. As already pointed out, the conflicting voices of glorification and vilification merge after the murders of Noliwa and Nandi. Chaka's

rites of passage become increasingly that of an epic villain deserving nothing but vile damnation. Mofolo's reflection on Chaka's murder of his own mother re-enacts his transmutation after Noliwa's murder. The reader is told that '... then he killed his mother in the manner in which he had killed Noliwa.' And 'when Nandi died', the omniscient anti-epic narrator continues, 'Chaka once more felt as if something was pressing hard in his inside, exactly as on the day he killed Noliwa' (p.150). With these two heinous murders, Chaka crosses the thin line which separates wild beasts from human beings, evil from good and madness from sanity.

Another anti-traditional African posture which permeates all the five novels selected for this research is the rejection of the subservient role imposed upon women by traditional Africa. Just like in Mofolo's *Pitseng* (1910), a general cultural feature of the entire continent of Africa is isolated in *Chaka* and presented as a weakness peculiar to the Zulu kingdom. The subservient status imposed on women by traditional Africa is orchestrated in order to intensify the denigration of the images of the Zulus and Chaka. This general social failing of the African continent is, however, presented as a Zulu weakness. There is the persistent suggestion that Chaka treats women as subhumans. We are told that in 'In these wars Chaka killed all the married people, the old people and the children,' and '... *the girls were made into slaves who served the armies ...*' (p.136, my emphasis). The novel's anti-traditional African viewpoint, which contends that women in Zululand are subjected to servitude, is further reinforced when Mzilikazi gives reasons for his rebellion against Chaka. The rebel general urges his warriors to take the Zulu women 'out of their bondage' (p.140).

The text's representation of the suffering of women in the Zulu kingdom is further reinforced if we link it to the gratuitous killings of women by Chaka. Towards the end of Chaka's career,

the author intensifies its disfigurement of the Zulu kingdom and Chaka by creating a succession of incidents of the satanic slaughter of his subjects, particulary women, by the demented king. The massacre of thousands of women after the defeat of the Zulu armies by the Pondo is a classic example. We are told that in order to comply with Malunga's vision that the recent defeats of the Zulu armies stem from the fact that Chaka's spear has stopped spilling blood because he does not go to war any longer, Chaka kills 'all the women who had been captured in wars and the Zulu women whose husbands had been killed by the diseases of the north and by wars' (p.149).

The servile status foisted by Chaka on women, Mofolo's anti-traditional narrator intimates, is revealed by the size of his harem, his deflowering of the cream of Zulu women and the horrendous punishment meted out to those 'sisters' who become pregnant or 'become too worn out to please' him:

> But Chaka had no wife, he never married. Instead he chose for himself the most beautiful girls in the nation; who were well built and smooth and brown like the cannabis seed; the ones with beautiful bodies and perfect poise, and he kept bringing them into his houses. He called them his sisters, which meant they were ones with whom he could have no carnal contact, and yet they were the very ones whom he continually visited; *he ate the young fruit of other men's daughters, picking the very flower of their youth, and when they became too worn out to please him, he would pass them on to his councillors,* if they were still alive. We shall tell later of the way in which many of them met their end. (p.149, my emphasis)

In traditional Africa, the chief is the symbol and the source of the community's heritage and racial purity. Mofolo's portrayal of Chaka's immorality is not only an indictment of his reign, but also that of traditional Africa. Polygamy is an ancient custom in traditional Africa - a tradition which is still practised throughout the continent. Perhaps the largeness of Chaka's harem is not what is being questioned. What appear to be challenged here are the unlimited powers of the absolute African chief, the

institution of polygamy, and the status of servility forced upon the traditional African women. The last sentence of the quotation above alerts the reader to be on the look-out for how Chaka treats his 'sisters' who have lost the feminine appeal. These sex objects are forbidden from getting pregnant. We are told that '...he instructed his trusted man, Ndlebe, to see to it that every single child born to those young women should be killed on the very day of its birth, so that no child fathered by him should survive' (p.149). That is not all: the mothers who cry for their infants are also killed. The Zulu king, who is expected by traditional ethics to be the ethnic symbol of virtue, the reader is repeatedly reminded, turns out to be the source of moral decay which subverts the Zulu society. We are told that although Chaka has never paid the *bohadi* for Noliwa, he continues to see her until she becomes pregnant (p.121). Though traditionally 'the chief can do no wrong', the novel questions his role as the keeper of traditional morality and cultural treasures.

The climactic events which heighten the novel's condemnation of traditional African concepts of women as second class citizens are the murders of the pregnant Noliwa and that of Nandi. Mofolo in *Chaka* suggests that women are treated as chattels which can be disposed of at will. It is pertinent to observe that this theme, which appears in its nascent form in Mofolo's *Chaka*, is given more elaborate treatment in Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1930), Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* (1968) and Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) and *The Healers* (1978).

Undoubtedly, the most extraordinary symbol Mofolo puts to use in effecting his demolition of the cumulative image of Chaka is his unique handling of the imagery of the sun. The Mandingo griot, Djeli Mamoudou Kouyate's manipulation of the imagery of the sun in Niane's *Sundiata* (1965) shows that the symbol of the sun is not only a vital constituent in African oral epic traditions, but it can also be exploited to generate multi-symbolic referents.

Wole Ogundele endorses this interpretation in his recent article, 'Orality versus Literacy in Mazisi Kunene's *Emperor Shaka the Great*'. Drawing upon J.E. Cirlot's *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Ogundele says that '... the sun is the heroic principle at its brightest, the direct son and heir of heaven (Ogundele, 1992:14), "the active principle and the source of life and energy"' (Cirlot, 1962:208-209). The griot's first use of the imagery of the sun appears in an allusion to '... Alexander the Great, the mighty king of gold and silver, *whose sun shone over quite half the world* (Niane, 1965:23, my emphasis). The above figurative use intimates that Alexander the Great exercises absolute control over the sun.

In the second image of the sun in Niane's *Sundiata* (1965) the griot asserts that *'Under his [Sundiata's] sun the upright man was rewarded and the wicked one punished'* (Niane, 1965:81, my emphasis). Like Alexander the Great's exercise of proprietorship over the sun, the phrase 'under his sun' does not only suggest Sundiata's exercise of absolute control over of the sun, but it also discloses the eclectic potential of the symbolic use of the sun. First, Kouyate's manipulation of this oral epic device shows that it embodies within its signification a union of opposites. It can either be utilized to exalt the image of the epic hero or to vilify the villains, who are usually the epic hero's arch-enemies. This sun motif is also used to equate the epic hero with supernatural beings, forces, and gods.

In the chapter entitled 'The Names of the Heroes', Kouyate links Sundiata's destiny to that of the sun just as Mofolo tethers his 'inverted epic hero's' destiny to the sun's course:

> Soumaoro [Sumanguru] got back to Sosso to recover his strength while on all sides villages opened their gates to Sundiata. In all these villages Sundiata recruited soldiers. *In the same way as light precedes the sun, so the*

> *glory of Sundiata, overleaping the mountains, shed itself on all the Niger plain.*
>
> (Niane, 1965:54, my emphasis)

The griot equates Sundiata's imperial glory to the sunlight shining over 'all the Niger plain'. The creative purpose of the griot is obvious: to celebrate Sundiata's martial glory and supreme power. Kouyate's fourth deployment of the imagery of the sun, which unveils the declining fortune of Sumanguru, the epic villain and the arch-enemy of Sundiata, further unveils the intricacy of this epic technique and Mofolo's brilliant adaptation of this traditional African epic device:

> The arrow [with the magical antidote - the cock's spur - to which the Sorcerer King Sumanguru is vulnerable] flew and grazed Soumaoro on the shoulder. The cock's spur no more than scratched him, but *the effect was immediate and Soumaoro felt his powers leave him.* His eyes met Sundiata's. *Now trembling like a man in grip of a fever, the vanquished Soumaoro looked up towards the sun. A great black bird flew over above the fray and he understood. It was a bird of misfortune....*
>
> Death hovered over the great plain and blood poured out of a thousand wounds. Who can tell how many Sossos perished at Krina? *The rout was complete and Sundiata then dashed off in pursuit of Soumaoro. The sun was at the middle of its course.*
>
> (Niane, 1965:65, my emphasis)

The narrative patterning of the loss of Sumanguru's mystical powers, the physical change he undergoes and his vision of his own demise are very similar to the climactic process of disintegration which heralds Chaka's assassination. The once omnipotent sorcerer, King Sumanguru, is said to be '*trembling like a man in grip of a fever*'. We are told he looks at the sun and sees the 'great black bird ... of misfortune' (Niane, 1965:65) which symbolizes his own doom. The griot's mastery in exploiting the imagery of the sun is debunked by his juxtaposition of the routing of the Sossos and the flight of the epic villain, King Sumanguru, hotly pursued by Sundiata, with the sun's progression to its zenith. To proclaim this momentous victory of the epic hero, the bard tells us that '*The sun was at*

the middle of its course.' This signifies unambiguously that Sundiata's defeat of King Sumanguru has pushed him to the very peak of the epic heroic grandeur and absolute power.

Mofolo displays the same skill in his handling of the imagery of the sun in order to undermine Chaka's legendary image. He achieves his artistic aim by inverting the epic heroic function of the imagery of the sun and by subjecting Chaka to a status-reversal. Instead of treating Chaka's relationship with the sun as one between the sun and an epic hero as the Mandingo griot has done in his celebration of Sundiata, Mofolo reverses it and treats it as a relationship between an epic villain and the sun.

The patterning of the figurative and symbolic use of the sun is, like the rest of the novel, mantled in ambiguity and mystery. Mofolo uses the sun in two separate senses: the prosaic and the metaphorical. In the geographical and ethnographical introductory paragraphs of the novel the sun is used in a literal sense. The narrator asserts that 'It is a land of dense mists which often clear only after *the sun* has risen high ...' (p.2, my emphasis). Mofolo writes here under the guise of the traditional chronicler and his narrative is factual, colourless, and almost clinical.

But the next example of the narrative structure incorporating the sun symbol, taken from another section of the novel, embodies the characteristic equivocation and incongruity which dominate the text. After Chaka has fled for his life - a flight triggered by his father's order to his men to kill him - he reviews his rites of passage from birth to the present in the wilderness. This review leads to a momentous decision: *'How I shall take my revenge the day that sun of mine shall rise!* (p.35, my emphasis). The use of the sun imagery in this declaration, unlike the first example, is cloaked in ambiguity. Chaka obviously sees his future career as supernatural and predestined, linked to the destiny of the sun, the eternal source of life on earth and the supreme

cosmic body. It is also clear that Chaka perceives his future attainment of kingship in hyperbolic and omnipotent terms.

The juxtaposition of Chaka's epic and legendary rise with the cosmic power of the sun is re-enacted by Isanusi when he finds Chaka asleep under a tree in the veld after his flight. In his invocation of ancestral spirits and transmission of magical powers to Chaka, Isanusi intones: 'May all his enemies vanish when he appears, like mist that evaporates when *the sun rises*!' (p.42). The eclectic and metaphorical mode displayed by this symbolic use of the sun is completely opposite to the matter-of-fact use of the sun in the opening paragraphs of the novel. The voice of the traditional bard appears to be in control here.

Mofolo's artistic purpose in linking Chaka's destiny with the sun becomes most evident only at the end of the novel. The epic and the supernatural grandeur of Chaka revealed, during his youth and at the peak of his kingship, are then on the wane. The once omnipotent hero is now depicted as an ordinary man tormented by nightmares and delusions. In the most detailed, intricate and symbolic patterning of the sun imagery, embedded in a panegyric structure, Mofolo unmasks his intention in exploiting the sun motif in his subversion of Chaka's legendary and epic heroic status. The narrator tells us that *'The sun came up' in its usual glory and power, but Chaka 'got up ... with great difficulty' ... and 'held himself steady ....'* Through the deployment a self-referential narrative structure, the anti-bardic voice aimed at projecting a counter version of Chaka's image reiterates that Chaka's destiny is no longer tethered to that of the sun. Chaka struggled to support himself on his feet and *'conversed with the people; yet as he spoke to them they were conscious that he was no longer the Chaka they knew.'* By using his favourite cocktail style, a synthesis of the sun *leitmotif* and the inverted praise song technique, Mofolo unveils the process of Chaka's tragic and agonizing disintegration. The once intrepid and omnipotent King

is portrayed as being like a tottering baby that is afraid of its own shadow: '*The lion of Zulu descent, ... the fearless beast of the wilds, ... stood up sapped of his strength, unable even to raise his mane.*' The anti-Zulu narrator then adds that '*... the great elephant, ... stood up tremblingly, drained of all his strength, gasping like an ox suffering from the mmamotohwane disease, with its ears drooping besides*' (p.164, my emphasis). The reader is thus alerted to the fact that Chaka's doom is inevitable and imminent.

To achieve the desired imaginative reconstruction of Chaka, Mofolo connects Chaka's rites of passage with the fortunes of the sky and the sun. The powerful king's daily routine is also regulated by the sun. The narrator tells us that '*... when the sun began to get warm, he [Chaka] would come out of his house with Mbopha ....*' (p.110). This particular use of the sun reveals nothing metaphorical, but it intimates that the sun directs Chaka's daily routine. The codal stylistic patterning of the imagery of the sun and the aim behind its deployment are disclosed during the closing crisis of Chaka's career. Towards the end of Chaka's life - the imminent demise of the legendary hero reputed to be endowed with supernatural powers - Mofolo, for the first time, ***makes the sun set:***

> When *the sun set on that day it left him* [Chaka] *in dire grief*, with not a moment of rest as *he paced about unable to stay in one place*, as if there was water boiling furiously in his stomach. *His eyes sank deep in their sockets*, receding far to the back; and sometimes they bulged out and drooped like those of a drunkard whose lungs had been consumed by liquor. His head swam and countless images flitted through his mind .... He ... was *like a horse from the Zambezi that is seized with madness* when it has been struck by the sickness of that land, which makes *it run about and bite itself, tearing the flesh from its body with its own teeth, unable to control itself* since it is compelled by its sickness .... (p.160, my emphasis)

The setting of the sun initiates and heralds Chaka's gradual but ordained disintegration. By severing Chaka's destiny from that

of the glorious rising of the sun and linking Chaka's physical and mental breakdown with the setting of the sun, the anti-epic narrator, who has effectively neutralized the African traditional epic voice which opens the novel, presages Chaka's impending doom. With the setting of the sun, the irreverent anti-bardic narrator tells us, Chaka, the demi-god *(Bayede)*, is plagued by 'dire grief' and is divested of his supernatural gifts and powers. He is like a sick 'horse from Zambezi seized with madness' and the sickness '*makes it run about and bite itself, tearing flesh from its body with its own teeth' and 'unable to control itself'*. Equally intriguing is the shrinkage of Chaka's eyes in particular. There is a subtle but a nagging intimation that the sinking of Chaka's eyes into their sockets is a mirror image of the setting of the sun - the symbolic diurnal demise of the sun, which in turn foreshadows Chaka's own death. The persistent hints that Chaka's bravery and strength may become instruments of his own destruction are also thus fulfilled. The agonizing transmutation Mofolo's "inverted epic hero" is subjected to suggests that he has broken down physically and mentally and is gradually going through a process of fragmentation or some form of dementia. Mofolo then finally unveils the severance of the mystical bond between Chaka's epic rise and that of the sun.

The discourse designed to effect Chaka's vilification, which is now magnified by Mofolo's handling of the imagery of the sun, likens Chaka's disintegrating and declining fortunes to the setting sun. The anti-epic narrative voice of subversion asserts that 'The sun set, and the evening shadows formed and deepened ... and as soon as sleep came, his painful dreams ... like spirits more evil than *the tikoloshe*, visited him again' (p.161). The godlike ruler is now plagued by nightmares and hallucinations. What we see here is a reversal of 'the mystical fortification' and 'ritual purification' ceremonies performed on Chaka by the Bungane *inyanga*, the King of the Deep Pool, and

Isanusi. Chaka, the once invincible despot, is petrified by visions of his impending assassination and fall. Chaka's symbolic relationship with the sun is terminated just before his assassination by his half-brothers and Mbopha. The anti-legendary narrator highlights Chaka's titanic epic fall by juxtaposing the rising sun with the 'falling Chaka' (p.164). But whereas Chaka, 'the human sun sets', denoting his inevitable disintegration and final demise, the eternal sun rises again in its eternal glory. Through this stylistic artistry, Mofolo forewarns the reader about Chaka's imminent, monumental, epic collapse and pokes fun at the puny aspirations of humans who compare themselves to the immortal celestial bodies and deities.

The symbolic use of the sun closes the novel. The surface meaning of the sentence 'When the sun had set his [Chaka's] corpse was carried to a little rise in the open plains so that it should be devoured by the beasts of the veld' (p.167) denotes nothing ambiguous. The genius of Mofolo's style conceals the pervasive element of the equivocal under the guise of overt verbal simplicity. The disposal of Chaka's body as carrion for predators is a fulfilment of Nandi's mysterious declaration, 'There has been born to you a boy, an ox of the vultures ....' (p.6), which in the beginning announces Chaka's birth to his father. The juxtaposition of the setting sun with the disposal of the corpse is a final acknowledgement of Chaka's human, and cosmic demise: both the sun (his cosmic double and the symbol of his absolute power) and his physical being have finally sunk.

Mofolo closes the novel with a re-enactment of the fateful meeting between Isanusi and Chaka. Thus as Chaka's demise closes upon him with horrifying hallucinatory nightmares, Isanusi, accompanied by his two servants, appears in Chaka's waking-dream and demands payment for helping him achieve supreme kingship. Chaka is shocked to realize that Isanusi does not want payment in cattle. What Isanusi wants is Chaka's life; Chaka must

surrender his physical and spiritual beings to Isanusi in exchange for the supreme kingly power he has briefly wielded. This aesthetically satisfying end of the novel is perceived as a mimicry of the Faust theme. Clearly, Isanusi is not only an incarnation of evil but also a symbol of ultimate political power. Thus the Faustian evocation could also be seen as a manifestation of a perverted political omnipotence which inevitably destroys those who succumb to its elusive and seductive powers - its mystified destructive potential.

This critique cannot be complete without an attempt to unravel Mofolo's artistic objective. The Christian reading of the novel maintains that Mofolo's Christian upbringing accounts for his portrayal of Chaka as a depraved, tyrannical king who wallows in paganism, witchcraft and bloodshed. The biographical details of Mofolo's missionary training and the pronounced Christian background of his first two works, *Moeti oa Bochabela* (1907) and *Pitseng* (1910), substantiate this critical view. In her 'The Shaka Theme in Dramatic Literature in French West Africa' (1974), Dorothy S. Blair sees the Christian influence as being responsible for Mofolo's vision of Chaka and traditional Africa. Blair asserts that 'in the *Chaka* of Thomas Mofolo, the writer who, as the product of Christian missionary training, saw the Zulu chief as a savage and terrifying matricide who had received from the sorcerer Isanusi the secret of omnipotence in exchange for the promise of utter ruthlessness; his death being thus the just retribution for his paganism' (1974:137). Ogungbesan sanctions Blair's view when he asserts that Mofolo's representation of Chaka's reign and traditional Africa emanates from his Christian moral background. Ogungbesan declares that 'Mofolo's *Chaka* is a moral fable, very deeply influenced by the author's missionary upbringing.' The late Nigerian critic also perceives Isanusi as 'a personification of' Chaka's paganism' (1974/1975:87). Another African critic who contends that Mofolo's vision is coloured by Christianity and his parochial Sotho

ethnocentrism is Ben Obumselu who also maintains that Mofolo's anti-traditional-African attitude which permeates the novel derives from his Christian indoctrination and his being an outsider: 'a Sotho writing about a Zulu, a Christian writing about pagans, a moralist describing the corruption of political authority.' Obumselu further adds that either 'his long apprenticeship at the mission shaped Mofolo's moral and religious sensibility or the demands of the press certainly conditioned his writing' (1975:33).

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin also sanction the thesis of the missionary factor in their seminal work, *The Empire Writes Back* (1989). They maintain that the 'evolving discourse of the post-colonial ... literature' written in the nineteen century by 'African "missionary" writers compromises traditional African values' (1989:5). Mofolo's *Chaka* is cited as a classic example of works of 'African "missionary" literature produced "under imperial licence"' by "natives" or "outcasts". They contend that although Mofolo 'deals with such powerful material as ... the historical potency of the supplanted and denigrated native cultures (Mofolo's *Chaka*) ...' he is 'prevented from fully exploring' this 'anti-imperial potential' because 'the institution of "Literature" in the colony is under the direct control of the imperial ruling class who alone licence the acceptable form and permit the publication and distribution of the resulting work' (Ashcroft et al, 1989:6).

In the end, this study endorses the view of Ashcroft et al (1989) that Mofolo's *Chaka* compromises traditional African values and fails to exploit the 'anti-imperial potential' which opens the novel. This investigation, however, seriously queries the reasons they cite for Mofolo's failure to sustain his initial radical anti-imperial posture. Though the postcolonial theory presented by *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) underscores the ideological and thematic undercurrents of Mofolo's *Moeti oa Bochabela* (1907) and

Pitseng (1910), the critical view put forward is too general and too simplistic to be of any significant use in unravelling the equivocal and enigmatic structure of *Chaka*. Besides this, the fact that Mofolo wrote all his novels in Sesotho invalidates the assertion that 'The producers signify by the very fact of writing in the language of the dominant culture that they have temporarily or permanently entered a specific and privileged class endowed with the language, education, and leisure necessary to produce such works' (Ashcroft et al, 1989:5). This does not suggest that this critique questions the missionary influence. The fact that the missionaries were the final arbiter in deciding which Black African works were published by their publishing companies is bound to have influenced the contents of these texts. That Mofolo's *Chaka* had to wait for fifteen years before it was published because the missionaries felt it was an apology for witchcraft and paganism confirms the presence of this missionary factor. The question of why Mofolo's work compromises traditional African heritage is, however, more complex than Ashcroft et al (1989) would have us believe.

Another critic who links Mofolo's non-celebratory version of Chaka to his missionary indoctrination is O. R. Dathorne. Dathorne's review 'Thomas Mofolo and the Sotho Hero' contends that Mofolo's inability to glorify traditional Africa is due to a Christianity-engendered 'new melancholy' which 'has entered the African soul':

> ... Chaka is neither pure history nor ethics; it is part of the tradition of the praise-poem and the hero monomyth but both of these have undergone a startling blend and a unique transformation. The catalytic effect of the missionaries had caused a renewal of concepts; a new melancholy has entered the African soul and no longer can the natural world, gods and man be accepted *in toto*, without question.
> (Dathorne, 1966:153)

Dathorne's view that, generically, *Chaka* is a synthesis of narrative patterns goes to the heart of the generic debate on the

novel. This review article argues that the missionary contact plays a part in Mofolo's portrayal of the Zulu hero as a villain - a critical postulation which is echoed by many critics.

Gerard's *Four African Literatures* (1971) also lists three reasons for Mofolo's vilification of the collective images of Chaka and traditional Africa. The first of the three factors is that Mofolo was a Sotho whose people suffered grievously from the Wars of Calamity triggered by Chaka's imperialism. The second reason is that the *difaqane* generated ethnic hostility which the author shared with his people and which was intensified by his Christian upbringing. Gerard's third formulation is a qualification of the first two reasons: 'But Mofolo was not only Christian and a Sotho. He was also an African, whose native continent was being increasingly and irresistibly incorporated into the white man's sphere' (1971:125-126). This comment not only contradicts the first two formulations, but it also renders the thrust of Gerard's interpretation somewhat ambiguous. Fifteen years later Gerard clarifies this ambiguity in his article appropriately entitled 'Rereading *Chaka*' (1986). In his later work Gerard unveils an insight which echoes this chapter's view of the fundamental reason behind Mofolo's portrayal of Chaka as a villain:

> One must keep in mind that, for the Sotho, Chaka was a sort of Clovis, or Attila even - a blood thirsty tyrant, drunk with ambition, who, for twenty years, wrought terror and desolation over a territory as vast as Italy. The Sotho people are a blend of several tribes who sought and found refuge behind the Drakensberg ridges. Mofolo is to Chaka what Tolstoy was to Bonaparte. It is inconceivable to have a Sotho novelist making Chaka a positive hero, just as no French novelist will glorify Bismarck, Wilhelm II or Hitler.
>
> (Gerard, 1986:5)

Perhaps Gerard should have suggested the unlikelihood of an Israeli novelist romanticizing Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany. Obumselu's trenchant postulation that Mofolo's Christian

background is not crucial in explicating the author's hostile attitude towards Chaka endorses both mine and Gerard's analysis of the root causes of Mofolo's subversion of the dominant image of the Zulu kingdom and the Zulu king. Obumselu declares, and rightly too, that 'Missionary indoctrination is not needed to explain an attitude which Mofolo shares with his contemporaries, an attitude accounted for historically by the unspeakable suffering of the *mfecane*' (1975:38). The denigration of the images of the Matabeles and the Zulus and their kings by Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1978) and S.M. Molema's *The Bantu: Past and Present* (1920) substantiate this critical sensibility. It is reasonable to assume that ethnocentrism and the urge of the writers of the victims of the *difaqane* to reinterpret the Wars of Calamity from the points of view of their own peoples should naturally make them romanticize and idealize the history of their own peoples and vilify their conquerors and oppressors.

Parodying the role of the traditional court historian, Mofolo makes an ambiguous allusion to the unstated mysterious creative purpose behind his selective use and interpretation of the existing historical sources, his exaggerations, omissions and fictitious additions only intensify the mystery:

> The events in Chaka's life were overwhelming because they were so numerous and of such tremendous import; they were like great mysteries which were beyond the peoples's [sic] understanding. But since it is not our purpose to recount all the affairs of his life, we have chosen only one part which suits our present purpose. (p.153)

Mofolo's artistic aim is to subvert the African collective legendary image of Chaka. To achieve this creative purpose, Mofolo resorts to a selective use of history, oral sources, and inventive creations of fictitious characters and events, which never actually occurred in the life of the historical Chaka, in order to highlight the negative effects of Chaka's reign and the *difaqane*. In the introduction to his translation of Mofolo's *Chaka* (pp.xiv-xviii) Daniel Kunene lists the areas in which

Mofolo's tale clashes with Zulu recorded and oral history. The following are some of Mofolo's fictional inventions which are at variance with history: that Senzangakhona's involvement with Nandi stems from the desire to sire a son since his other wives have given birth to no sons; Mofolo's creation of Isanusi and his servants; the episode in which Chaka renames his kingdom 'AmaZulu' - a name which was in existence before Chaka was born and originated from the Zulu progenitor 'Uzulu kamalandela'; the creation of Noliwa; and the episode of Chaka's murder of Nandi, his mother.

Since Mofolo's pre-occupation with portraying Chaka as an evil hero determines the author's revision of Zulu oral and written history, it is pertinent to investigate, rather briefly, his re-ordering of history - the clash between history and fiction. Let us isolate the novelist's greatest departure from history: his fictional creation of Chaka's murder of Nandi. European historical texts - E.A. Ritter's *Shaka Zulu* (1958:275), J.D. Omer-Cooper's *The Zulu Aftermath* (1966:39), and Christopher Saunders' *Illustrated History of South Africa* (1986:67) - all maintain that Nandi died of natural causes. This historical affirmation is authenticated by perhaps the most conservative of the European colonial historians, A.T. Bryant, whose portraiture of Shaka in his *Olden Times in Zululand and Natal* (1929:659) emerges as one of the most distorted historical portrayals of the Zulu legendary king. The Nandi murder incident is therefore nothing but one of the many creative ploys crafted by Mofolo to effect his divestment of traditional Africa's mythical splendour and Chaka's legendary grandeur.

Daniel Kunene and Neil Lazarus isolate one of the root causes for Mofolo's inability to celebrate Chaka's legendary life. Kunene's 'Shaka in the Literature of Southern Africa' (in Burness, 1976:190) and Lazarus's 'The Logic of Equivocation in Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*' (1986) maintain that Mofolo is torn between love-

hate polarities. Lazarus argues that 'Mofolo's ambivalence' stems from a 'rather ... determinate' (1986:44) and 'an unforgoable ideological impasse' (1986:45). Lazarus' view is echoed by Burness who postulates that:

> Mofolo's feeling towards Chaka is best characterized as ambiguous. There is a curious mixture of contempt for his cruelty and malice, and respect for his awe inspiring deeds.
>
> (Burness, 1976:6)

In his critical work on Thomas Mofolo, Daniel Kunene underpins the novelist's latent hostility towards Chaka and the Zulus and accuses him of 'displaying strong anti-Nguni sentiments ... not restricted to the Zulu people' (1989:172). Kunene's extensively-researched work also exposes the main source of Mofolo's novel. Though Mofolo had conducted a widespread research in Natal before writing his novel, Kunene's work reveals that the majority of the myths and legends manipulated by Mofolo are taken from 'certain bits of Zulu history collected by Sekese' and published in a series entitled *Buka ea Taba tsa Zulu (Book of the Chronicles of Zulu)* in the *Leselinyana* from February to July 1894. What is extremely instructive about Kunene's comparison of Mofolo's version of historical events with Sekese's versions is the consistency with which Mofolo relies on Sekese's 'scraps of Zulu history and Sotho legends and myths' in crafting his novel. The similarities are profound. Mofolo's only main departures from Sekese's versions of the events in Chaka's life are his creative inventions like the Isanusi and the Noliwa parts. Significantly, the killing of Nandi by Chaka, which is Mofolo's greatest departure from historical facts corroborated elsewhere, is also reported in Sekese's chronicles. In summing up his investigation of why Mofolo creates such an evil hero and repudiates the martial image of the Zulus, Kunene concludes that 'On balance, one cannot escape the conclusion that Mofolo's intention as he selected his facts or interpreted them or created new fictitious episodes which did not happen in Chaka's life, was to project him

as the embodiment of pure evil, a villain with no redeeming feature whatsoever' (1989:172). My reading of the novel is confirmed by Kunene's conclusions and formulation of the root cause of the Sotho novelist's abrasive sentiments when he asserts that 'One can only surmise that this strong anti-Nguni feeling was a direct consequence of the notoriety for cruelty which the Zulus earned themselves during Chaka's rule and the resulting *difaqane*' (Kunene, 1989:173).

Modern African historians regard the phenomenal rise of nation states which replaced the countless clan-based tribes owing to the aftermath of Shaka's military innovations as the 'Golden Age' in Southern African history. Mofolo's fictional reconstruction of the *difaqane* discounts this Afrocentric interpretation. Mofolo's *Chaka* opens with an idyllic picture of pre-*mfecane* Southern Africa and suggests that, if Southern Africa ever experienced any paradise (the Golden Age), then that period was the pre-Shakan era dominated by King Jobe and King Dingiswayo of the Mthethwa. In re-creating the state of affairs during the pre-*difaqane* period under the guise of the traditional African court historian, Mofolo projects an anti-traditional posture when he declares that '*In the whole Nguniland there was peace and prosperity and the land was warm and the nations lived in great contentment when Chaka took the road with his armies to go and bring that peace to an end*' (p.128, my emphasis). The anti-traditional narratorial voice continues and asserts that although wars were not unknown in pre-*difaqane* Southern Africa, '... the sufferings which were occasioned by the difaqane were unknown in the olden days ....' The pre-*difaqane* period is said to be enveloped in '*so much peace and prosperity*' (p.4). The thesis which informs this novel is the view that Chaka is the root cause of the Wars of Calamity: 'the originator of all evil' (p.137). King Dingiswayo's reign is directly contrasted to that of Chaka. We are told that when 'Dingiswayo arrived and became king ... *The land basked in the warmth of peace and plenty*' (pp.105-106, my

emphasis). The omniscient anti-epic narrator submits Chaka to further censure and declares that *'It was at this time that, on account of hunger, people began to eat each other as one eats the flesh of a slaughtered animal ...* (p.137, my emphasis).

Mofolo's historical reconstruction of pre-European Africa in *Chaka* is overtly anti-traditional-African. The most disturbing and most puzzling facet of this enigmatic novel is the militant ideological stance which opens the text:

> South Africa is a large headland situated between two oceans, one to the east and one to the west. The nations that inhabit it are numerous and greatly varied in custom and language ... They are the San and the Khoi. The ones in the centre are the Batswana and the Basotho. Those to the east are the Bakone or the Matabele .... they are boundaries created by God, not man .... (p.1)

This narrative structure is devoid of any elements of fiction. It reads like an extract from an ethnographical text. Many critics are puzzled by the matter-of-fact narrative pattern of the opening paragraphs of the novel. The factual and clinical characteristics of this section of the text seduce Obumselu (in C. Heywood, 1975) into asserting erroneously that 'It is very likely that Mofolo did not think of his work as a novel but a biography' (1975:38). Obumselu supports his critical formulation with the evidence that Mofolo researched his subject by cycling through Natal and visiting Chaka's grave in 'Mgungundlovu'. Obumselu's assertion that 'His geographical and historical introductions to the story suggest that the narrative will be factual' (1975:38), clearly demonstrates that he has failed to reconcile the geographical and the ethnographic paragraphs with the rest of the equivocal and enigmatic work. Without belabouring the point, it could be argued that Mofolo's reply of 10 August 1928 to Rev S.M. Malale's letter which appeared in *Leselinyana* on 6 July 1928 criticizing Mofolo's historical inaccuracies discounts Obumselu's view. The thrust of Mofolo's reply is as follows:

> I believe that errors of this kind are very many in the book *Chaka*; but I am not very concerned about them because I am not writing history, I am writing a tale, or I should rather say I am writing what actually happened, but to which a great deal has been added, and from which a great deal has been removed, so that much has been left out, and much has been written that did not actually happen, with the aim solely of fulfilling my purpose in writing this book.
>
> (Mofolo, cited in Daniel Kunene, 1989:251)

This effectively invalidates Obumselu's critical assertion. The folktale formulaic ending of the novel, *'Ka mathetho'*, which means the 'End of the Tale', further confirms the perception that Mofolo's work is fictional and not biographical.

Mofolo's colourless and clinical narrative configuration of the introductory paragraphs of the novel can be interpreted on different levels. The first of these is the fact that in African oral traditions, the oral chronicler is the fountain-head of the community's oral history and heritage. Mofolo writes here under the guise of the traditional court historian, who is the keeper of the cultural and historical treasures of the community.

The geographical paragraph also deliberately omits European settlers and unequivocally rejects the colonial boundaries imposed upon the Black peoples. The declaration that the inalienable land demarcations which separated the different ethnic peoples of the indigenous Africans 'are boundaries created by God, not man....' is a defiant rejection of the alien-imposed boundaries arising from European settler intrusions. It also intimates that Mofolo re-asserts the African's right to retrieve his own fragmented history and to re-interpret it in his own way for the benefit of his community. This amounts to a repudiation of the European interpretation of African history. The genius of Mofolo's equivocal and ironic style introduces him as a militant, and to borrow from Neil Lazarus, an 'authoritative and uncompromising' African 'traditional chronicler' (1986:46;47).

Lazarus's interpretation of the opening paragraphs and Mofolo's failure to exploit the powerful anti-imperial theme confirms the thrust of this critique (1986:45-46):

> Indeed, what is ultimately at issue is not the accuracy or otherwise of prevailing versions of history, but the desirability of controlling one's own history. It is not so much truth that Mofolo is concerned with as the need for a people to have access to its own truths.

What is puzzling, if not absurd, is the fact that though Mofolo opens the novel with the radical assertion of 'the desirability of controlling one's own history' and 'the need for a people to have access to its own truths', instead of giving us the expected radical Afrocentric reinterpretation of Southern African history, he then goes on to eloquently confirm the degrading colonial view of traditional Africa. Lazarus further reinforces my interpretation of this baffling opening when he asserts that Mofolo's intentions in the opening paragraphs are 'to resist colonial representations of Southern African history and, above all, to contest the right of colonial theory to set itself up as the keeper of the keys to scientific human inquiry' (1986:46). However, since Mofolo's militant declaration of intent achieves the reverse, his anti-imperial stance amounts to nothing but an empty rhetorical radicalism.

Mofolo's initial ideological militancy and protest are ironically subverted by his own sustained affirmation of the colonial representations of traditional African values and of Chaka. Like all the other positive ideological and Afrocentric discourses which feed the novel's equivocal structure, this Pan-African nationalistic posture is never allowed to take root. Mofolo, under the guise of traditional chronicler and using the *imbongi*'s oral narrative tools, which are traditionally designed for the glorification of the epic hero, succeeds in luring the reader into accepting the odious colonial image of traditional Africa as the 'Dark Continent' wallowing in perpetual paganism,

witchcraft, tyranny and bloodshed. This repulsive image which is presented by the novel, Mofolo maintains, is the authentic portraiture of 'the Golden Age of the Zulus'.

There is, however, a positive side to Mofolo's project: his literary legacy to African literature. His ingenious adaptation of the African epic genre maps out how the African oral arts could be made to bear the burden of Africa's creative literate culture. Mofolo's revisionist approach to African orature is demystified by Wole Ogundele's insight which is contained in his 'Orality versus Literacy in Mazisi Kunene's *Emperor Shaka the Great*'. Basing his formulation on the thesis projected by Ong's *Orality and Literacy* (1982), Ogundele asserts that 'the technology of orality is a totalising one while that of writing restructures, differentiates, and demonstrates' (1992:9-10). Two of Ogundele's thesis statements unmask Mofolo's contribution to the development of the oral-oriented African writing. He asks: 'Can oral noetics and rhetorics pass through the consciousness and process of writing and still remain unchanged? Can literature that is written perform the same function, and in the same manner, as oral literature?' (1992:9). All this leads us to Mofolo's literary bequest to African literature, particularly the oral-cum-literate tradition.

Mofolo's *Chaka* is a repudiation of the violent legendary tradition which permits chiefs who are mortal beings like all humans to project themselves as supernatural warrior-kings and be accepted without question by their people. The work rejects, overtly, the nation-building strategy which encourages the powerful to rout the weaker communities and to turn them into vassal political appendages or simply absorb them. The novel suggests that Africa's culture of despotism is nourished by the propensity of the ruled to grovel - a theme elaborated into an awesome thesis of demonic anger by Ouologuem and Armah. The text indicts the victims because they are said to be addicted to hero-

worshipping their leaders - a tradition which makes it possible for tyrannical and pseudo-magical kings and leaders to turn them into sycophants and servile beings. In a subtle vein, the novel implores traditional Africa to break away from its seduction by the supernatural and its reverence for the *royalty* and in general, its tendency to allow rulers, decked in pseudo-supernatural and legendary robe, to tyrannize it permanently. The novel, therefore, rewrites and corrects both the African history and the epic genre, structured around a tradition which immortalizes a culture of martial ferocity and tyranny. Though, unlike Armah's two novelistic histories, Mofolo's *Chaka* does not reject kingship which nourishes the legendary tradition, it discounts warrior-kingship which is enshrined in bombastic bloodletting legendary tradition, while recommending humane kingship, dedicated to the welfare of the larger community. How *Chaka's* break from the conventional practice of celebrating African legendary tradition and the peacockish strutting legendary heroes is elaborated upon by the other four novels - *Mhudi, Bound to Violence, Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers* - is the main purpose of this research.

NOTES

1. Thomas Mopoku Mofolo's *Chaka*, which was believed to be completed about 1909, was only published in 1925 because the French missionaries who first read the novel interpreted it as an apology for witchcraft and paganism. All subsequent page references (which are in brackets) are taken from the 1981 Heinemann edition.

2. The term, 'collective Black image', is defined and outlined in the background chapter. Its usage distinguishes between the distorted Eurocentric image and the Black counter-image created by non-creative Black writers from Africa and the Black diaspora to neutralize the colonial mythology which has maligned peoples of African descent from the ancient times to the present. In their attempts to negate the European 'Noble Savage Image' of Africa and to restore Africa's lost pride and dignity, the Black writers have created a highly romanticized portraiture of traditional Africa.

3. According to Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (1983:87), the 'implied author' or the authorial voice 'is - in opposition and by definition' to the narrator - 'voiceless and silent' - 'a construct inferred and assembled by the reader from all the components of the text.'

4. Since the term 'narrator' and 'narrative voices' will be frequently used in this research, it becomes important to define them. Drawing on Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse* (1978:148), Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan defines the narrator in his *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (1983:87-88) as the narrative "voice" - 'the agent which at least narrates or engages in some activity serving the needs of narration.' The narrator and 'the implied author' and the real author are not synonymous.

5. Mbongeni Malaba's 'The Legacy of Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*' is culled from his D.Phil. thesis entitled *Shaka as a Literary Theme* (1985), which was published by the University of York.

6. The one-sided readings projected by Ayi Kwei Armah's 'The Definitive Chaka' (1976) and Donald Burness's essay 'Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*' in his *Shaka, King of the Zulus* (1976) are being criticized here by Neil Lazarus (1986).

7. *Beowulf: The Oldest English Epic*. Translated and with an introduction by Charles W. Kennedy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940; 1968.

8. The notion of *'defamiliarization'* or *'estrangement'* is conceptualized by Victor Shklovsky in his essay on Russian Formalism which is entitled Sterne's *Tristram Shandy:* Stylistic Commentary'. The term is defined by Shklovsky as a system of

literary 'devices by which the familiar is made strange' in his work, *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (1965:25). According to M.H. Abrams's *A Glossary of Literary Terms,* (1985:237) 'The primary aim of literature in thus foregrounding its medium ... is to *estrange or defamiliarize;* that is, by disrupting the ordinary modes of linguistic discourse, literature "makes strange" the world of everyday perception and renews the reader's lost capacity for fresh sensation.

9. For further substantiation of externalization of the Isanusi parts, see Ezekiel Mphahlele's *The African Image* (1962:208), Peter Sulzer's comment (cited in Albert S. Gerard, 1971:120), Kolawole Ogungbesan's 'A King for All Seasons' (1974/1975:87), Donald Burness's *Shaka: King of the Zulus in African Literature* (1976:11), and Daniel Kunene's *Thomas Mofolo and the Emergence of Written Sotho Prose* (1989:126).

10. Ayi Kwei Armah 'Essay Review: The Definitive Chaka' (1975:12-13). *Transition*, 50. Cited in Derek Wright (1985:44) 'The Chaka syndrome: Armah and Mofolo'. *Literary Criterion* (2) 20.

11. Noliwa, who is more often referred to as Noliwe, is a mythical figure created by Mofolo. She is endowed by her creator with unsurpassed beauty and charm and presented as a paragon of spiritual and human excellence. Her murder by Chaka in pursuit of supreme glory and kingship marks his descent into the bottomless pit of amorality.

Chapter 3

Traditional African Epic Heroism Revised: A Reading of Sol T. Plaatje's Mhudi

This critique is concerned with analyzing the hypothesis that Sol T. Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1930; 1978), which is believed to be one of the first novels written in English by a Black South African, rejects "traditional" Africa's notion of legendary heroism and martially-oriented kingship rituals. The legendary tradition is seriously questioned by the novel because it is perceived to be the root cause of Africa's culture of despotism and destructive ethnic wars. To effect his deflation of the image of the tyrannical god-like kings of Africa, Plaatje manipulates the African oral arts - particularly the epic genre - and re-interprets the *mfecane/difaqane*[1] and the Great Trek. In the process of doing so, it appears Plaatje attempts to revise the traditional African view of the ideal/admirable man. Traditional African epic heroism, which has been used as a yardstick in measuring a man's status, is now perceived as inadequate because it generates a bloodthirsty and bombastic personality-cult coupled with the political culture of despotism. To translate this vision into fictional realism, the author reconstructs the "Wars of Calamity" through the perspectives of the victims of the *difaqane*: the Barolong and the Tswana people. Though the main target of the novel's satiric onslaught is King Mzilikazi[2] and his Matabele *impis*, *Mhudi* also castigates the Boers for their proclivity for tyranny, cruelty and land-grabbing.

Mazisi Kunene alludes to the novel's main two-pronged attack when he argues, in his review of Stephen Gray's *Sources of the First Black South African Novel in English: Solomon Plaatje's Use of*

Shakespeare and Bunyan in Mhudi, that he believes Plaatje's aim is to attack Mzilikazi and to criticize, obliquely, the white power base. In *Mhudi* the victims of despotism and the ethnic wars of conquest are never exonerated either: the Barolong and the Tswana are obliquely ridiculed and indicted for allowing their desire for revenge against the Matabele to blind them from perceiving the danger posed by the Voortrekkers' arrival in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State and from anticipating the possibility of their becoming victims of the Boer greed for land and absolute domination. This lack of judgement and intuition, the text suggests, compounds the vicious cycle of war, organized brutality, and dictatorship, which make them the permanent battleground. Like Mofolo and Armah, Plaatje is torn between the two ideological camps, which further complicated by his own creative purpose: the anti-imperialist theme which requires demolition of 'the whole hokus-pokus of colonial claims' (Mazisi Kunene, 1980:245); the creation of the Black counter-image to correct the Eurocentric mythical distortions of Africa; and, finally, the literary deflation of the image of legendary warrior-kings.

To effect this re-ordering of African history and traditional values necessitates a choice between Afrocentric and Eurocentric models of literary presentation - African aesthetics versus European literary tradition. Plaatje's ambivalence towards the cultural heritage of pre-colonial Africa is problematic and the definition of the Black romanticized image of pre-colonial Africa - particularly the concept of the African Golden Age - becomes critical in analyzing his work. My definition of this ideologically-loaded concept is grounded on the distinction between the Western classical notion of "*the mythical golden age*" and the Black collective notion of a pre-colonial African Golden

Age, which is discussed in detail in Chapter 1 of this study. The classical notion of "mythical paradise" is defined in M.H. Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms* as 'the traditional pastoral', 'the idyllic' and 'the bucolic' which 'classical poets ... often *describe in terms of the mythical golden age*' (Abrams, 1988:127-128). The celebration of the 'nostalgic image of the peace and simplicity of the life of shepherds and other rural folk in an idealized natural setting' (1988:128) - the Garden of Eden - constitutes only a minor segment of the Black idea of pre-colonial Africa's Golden Age. The concept of the mythical golden age based solely on the romanticization of the idyllic primitive life, as projected in *Mhudi,* is a European literary orientation which is irreconcilable with that of Black African aesthetics and the radical African intellectual tradition.

There is a long tradition among African writers of rejecting the European fetishization of beauty *per se* in favour of didactic literature or what Mazisi Kunene calls 'the combative African intellectual tradition' (Kunene, 1980:245). Thus 'the "erotica" of African life "from inside"' (Mazisi Kunene, 1980:247) is ridiculed by radical African writers and is not considered an Afrocentric celebration of pre-colonial Africa's glorious past. The African view of the Golden Age, on the other hand, is solidly grounded on the performance of the legendary warrior-kings: their epic conquests, their nation-building structures, their cultural treasures, their flamboyant display of material wealth and their splendour. European and African aesthetics generate two divergent views on the concept of art. While African writers tend to be guided by the notion of art for the larger community, shying away from the individualistically-centred literature, Eurocentric writers are preoccupied with the notion of art projected by an eponymous ego or art produced through personally-oriented vision.

Thus in Western literary tradition the informing motif behind art is the overwhelming allegiance to individualism while in the African radical literary tradition the creation of art is directed by the communal ethos. How Plaatje responds to these ideological impositions of 'the African combative intellectual tradition' constitutes one of the major concerns of this critique. The fundamental preoccupation of the above cognitive mapping is whether or not what Plaatje represents as 'the Garden of Eden' - the countless clan-based autonomous petty states in Southern Africa which were kinglets in the pre-*mfecane* period - is reconcilable with the African notion of the Golden Age.

Besides taking a critical look at Plaatje's re-interpretation of history and parodying of traditional African epic heroism, this investigation needs also to examine the influences at work on Plaatje. It has been speculated that there are two manuscripts of *Mhudi*: Plaatje's original manuscript and a revised version, incorporating non-African values and literary modes of production. In his review article Mazisi Kunene in particular criticizes *Mhudi*'s assimilation of the historical romance, Judeo-Christian mythology, and the English cultural and literary ethos, though he rejects Stephen Gray's thesis that *Mhudi* is a self-conscious imitation of Shakespeare's and Bunyan's works. Kunene cites the Ra-Thaga-Mhudi romantic episode in the wilderness and asserts that 'the episode itself is totally infantile and hangs loosely in between the violent actions of the warring parties ... totally incongruous ...' (Kunene, 1980:246). Obviously, Kunene endorses the view that the novel's structure and assimilation of European literary models was imposed upon Plaatje. The critic then asserts that Plaatje 'did not decide to emulate anyone or to equate situations but had this imposed on him by the structure he had to use' (1980:246). This critical controversy will not be

resolved until the alleged two manuscripts of *Mhudi* can one day be exhumed and studied. Until then, the purpose behind the text's heavy reliance on non-African aesthetics and value systems will remain mere critical conjectures.

The task here is to find if textual analysis confirms the hypotheses sketched above. The totalising effect of all these is that Plaatje's novel, like the works of his literary heirs, Ouologuem and Armah, is dominated by a series of conflicts and ambiguities: between the reports of the European colonial historians and the oral accounts of the traditional African chroniclers; between fact and fiction; between 'the workings of the literate mind and those of the oral mind' (Wole Ogundele, 1992:11); and finally, between the African tale-form and the Western literary tradition. The immediate task is to see how critics react to this text.

Plaatje's *Mhudi* is both denigrated and admired. In one of the first unflattering commentaries on the novel, published in *The Times Literary Supplement* (31 August 1933), an anonymous reviewer questions Plaatje's creative purpose in veering 'away from Africanism' 'towards Europeanism' and contends that Plaatje failed to develop the anti-imperial theme 'That might have been the first authentic utterance out of aeons of African silence'. *The Times* critic speculates that *Mhudi* might have been a better work of art if Plaatje had woven his novel around African traditional metaphysics and aesthetics. 'But one wonders', the reviewer writes, 'what secret fountain of African art might not have been unsealed if, in interpreting his people, a writer of Plaatje's insight had thought and written "like a Native"' (1933:574). In his *The South African Novel in English 1880-1930* (1952), J.P.L. Snyman also declares that *Mhudi* 'lacks the

spontaneity of Mitford's Untuswa series' (Snyman, 1952:141 cited in Tim Couzens, 1973:2). And according to Janheinz Jahn, in *A History of Neo-African Literature* (1966), this novel is 'weak in comparison with other [Black African] works' (1966:90). Plaatje's novel also takes a critical bash from Gerald Moore (1980), whose short review of *Mhudi* questions Plaatje's manipulation of Southern African history and his decision to write in English instead of writing in Tswana. Moore argues that Plaatje's 'account of that great and remarkable leader Mzilikazi would have benefited from more attention to Moffat's *Matabele Journals* and less to Tswana tradition about a "blood-thirsty tyrant"' (1980:248-249). The most outspoken dismissal of the novel, however, comes from the black South African critic, Mazisi Kunene:

> Plaatje, to survive as a creative writer, will need patrons from the Rand school because in so far as the true authentic classics of African literature are concerned, he will always be counted a borderline case, even then only because of his great political background. *Mhudi* itself is a second-rate, badly organized hodge-podge of semihistory, semifiction, shoddy allegory - a pastiche combining fact and fiction in a most illogical manner. To those championing *Mhudi* as a pioneering work, I say: Stop it!
> (Kunene, 1980:247)

Mazisi Kunene's contemptuous rejection of the view that the novel is an African classic appears to confirm Martin Tucker's comment that 'Plaatje is not highly regarded by his fellow African writers today' (1968:257, cited in Couzens 1973:2).

Mhudi, however, has its admirers as well. A complimentary review of the novel appeared in *The South African Outlook* (1 December 1930) in which the critic asserts that 'As a writer of English, Mr Plaatje seems to hold the premier place among Bantu authors' (1930:255). Tim Couzens is the most vocal among the critics who perceive *Mhudi* as a work of art worthy of critical attention. In

his 'Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*' (1973), Couzens asserts '... that *Mhudi* is a sensitive political novel, in which the historical moment of the 1830s was a carefully selected model for Plaatje's own situation in the period after Union and the Native Land Act of 1913' (1973:4).

Although I do not think that *Mhudi* is an African classic, the novel is an important landmark in the literary history of Black South African writing in English, deserving critical attention. The text's assimilation of African oral epic traditions is my first major preoccupation. Plaatje is well-informed about the traditional African notion of the epic hero and sets out to subvert its male chauvinistic features. The fundamental attribute of the epic hero is his noble birth. Ra-Thaga's father, Notto, is described as 'one of Tauana's righthand men, ... a wealthy chieftain', who owns 'three cattle stations and many cornfields' (Plaatje, 1978:29). This makes Ra-Thaga a prince. Although Ra-Thaga is not a known historical figure, the genealogy of the Barolong rulers provided by S.M. Molema's *The Bantu Past and Present* (1920:48) lists *Noto* as the second Barolong king after Morolong. The family tree of Plaatje's second protagonist, Mhudi, is not easy to unravel. Although there is no unequivocal textual evidence to suggest that Mhudi has noble ancestry, it is intimated that her father may have been a noble man. This interpretation is substantiated by Mhudi's comment on her polygamous noble father. Mhudi tells us that 'My mother had to share my father's affections with two other wives ... With such a monopoly in a man, and *a noble man at that*!' (p.70, my emphasis). This critical formulation is further confirmed by the fact that Mhudi has seventeen suitors whose genealogies are carefully examined and rejected by Mhudi and her aunt because of various defects in the suitors' family trees. Plaatje's letter

of 17 November 1922 to Mrs Lennox Murray reveals that Mhudi was 'a "real" historical figure' based on Plaatje's great-great-grandmother. He states that 'My mother is a direct descendant of a grandson of Tau from the house of his youngest and dearest wife, Mhudi' (Molteno Family Papers cited in Brian Willan, 1984:359).

Another element of the African oral epic tradition assimilated by the text is the attribute which Isidore Okpewho calls 'pre-eminence'. In his *The Epic in Africa* (1975:86), Okpewho asserts that the noble lineage of the epic protagonist is often linked with supernatural feats of bravery during his early youth, which set him apart from the ordinary life of his peers and inspire wonder and reverence. Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1956:97-98) calls this the period of 'succession of perilous trials' and 'adventures undertaken by the heroes of fairy tale and myth'. Although, unlike Mofolo in *Chaka*, Plaatje has not portrayed in detail the early adolescence of either Ra-Thaga or Mhudi, there are a few flashbacks which reveal Mhudi's teenage years. Mhudi's epic heroic attribute of pre-eminence, revealed in a flashback, portrays her first encounter with a lion. She says that 'Suddenly a frightful growl and terror drove the blood from all my veins' (p.69). Despite the fact that the terrified Mhudi performs no extraordinary deed of valour, and although it is her mates who frighten the lion away, Plaatje treats this incident as a feat of supernatural heroic bravery:

> So then ... you were the heroine of Motlokaditse, whose bravery was the pride of the countryside! ... I remember hearing that it was a Kgoro girl whose bravery crowned the whole of her clan in glory. (p.69)

In order to equip Mhudi with supernatural fortitude - the most essential ingredient of African oral epics - Plaatje creates

several lion episodes in which Mhudi's role is endowed with heroic flavour. That Ra-Thaga's first meeting with Mhudi has to do with her second experience with a lion confirms Plaatje's preoccupation with incorporating the legendary or supernatural elements of African oral epic traditions into his writing. Like Mofolo's Chaka, who becomes a leader of the herdboys owing to his awesome ferocity in fights and success in beating all his peers into submission, Mhudi's brave encounter with the king of beasts not only makes her the leader of her age-mates, but also a legendary heroine, 'whose bravery crowned the whole of her clan in glory' and attracts seventeen suitors. Mhudi's refusal to remain behind, coupled with her determination to go with Ra-Thaga in search of the lion she had spotted, confirms the amazing courage of the woman. In the novel's most fabulous and hyperbolic lion episode, Ra-Thaga grips the tail of a lion and spends the whole afternoon struggling with the king of beasts until Mhudi, who is sick in bed, finally gets up and kills it. Plaatje's dramatization of this episode into a marvellous deed of supernatural bravery underscores not only the author's attempt to ground the novel on African oral traditions, but also to parody African legendary heroic traditions:

> Most Bechuana women in such circumstances would have uttered loud screams for help. Mhudi yielded to the humour of the picture of her husband having a tug of war with the lion; highly amused, she gripped the situation, stepped forward ... and summoning all her strength, she aimed a stab at the lion's heart. The infuriated animal fell over with *a growl that almost caused the earth to vibrate* .... She forgot that she herself was the only female native of Kunana who had thrice faced the king of beasts, and had finally killed one with her own hand.
>
> (pp.64-66, my emphasis)

The sentence, '*The infuriated animal fell over with a growl that almost caused the earth to vibrate*', both evokes and ridicules

the hyperbolic and the ornate style which traditionally shapes and informs African oral epics. What the episode highlights, however, is how the man's role in this epic exploit is uncannily diminished while the woman's role is amplified, for whereas Plaatje inverts and subverts Ra-Thaga's intrepid role, he intensifies Mhudi's participation, giving it a legendary flavour. In fact the novel's portrayal of Ra-Thaga throughout tends to be ridiculed as anti-epic and anti-legendary. It is evident that Plaatje is manipulating the narrative mode of caricature which is aimed at subverting epic heroism and also hurling a sneer at the so-called fabulous legendary heroes that Africa worships. This inversion of epic heroism - traditionally reserved for males - is achieved by a persistent veiled tone of parody and mockery which divests Ra-Thaga's feats of any heroic stature. The sardonic humour, which colours almost all Ra-Thaga's actions, is also designed to undermine the traditional male proprietorship over acts of legendary heroism - the hallmark of African epic traditions.

The physical good looks of the hero or heroine are another characteristics of the epic heroic tradition of pre-eminence assimilated by the novel. Mhudi, the reader is told, 'had a magnificent figure':

> Her forehead completed the lovely contour of a slightly emaciated face, the colour of her skin was a deep brown that set off to advantage her brilliant black eyes. A pretty pair of dimples danced around her cheeks when she smiled; and the smile revealed an even set of ivories as pure as that of any child. Her bewitching mouth and beautiful lips created a sense of charm, and when she blew the fire she seemed to blow something into Ra-Thaga that almost maddened him with ecstasy and he wondered if her breath was charmed....He thought she had above her beaded ankles the most beautiful limbs he had ever seen. (pp.37-38)

There is a sustained creative effort to endow Mhudi with qualities of the epic heroine, while Ra-Thaga's grandeur is relentlessly undermined. Fear, Ra-Thaga's main anti-legendary trait, is revealed in the previously cited episode in which he meets Mhudi for the first time and she insists on his dealing with the lion she has encountered. The reader is told that 'Ra-Thaga, successfully *concealing his own fears*, asked, "You were not, then, observed by the animal, were you?"' Ra-Thaga, we are told, questions the rationale in confronting the lion which may not have seen her and which is '"... usually hunted by large companies of armed men aided by fierce mastiffs, and not by one badly armed man guided by a strange girl"' (p.35). The conflicting voices of the epic heroine and the anti-epic hero, concurrently deployed by the novel, achieves two creative effects. Firstly, they muffle the hyperbolic and the fantastic, veering from the African tale-form traditionally grounded in fantasy towards the European mimetic novel tradition. Secondly, contrary to the expectations of the epic hero, Ra-Thaga's portrait is a pathetic one which the reader is invited to laugh at. The anticipated epic fight with the lion turns out to be a mock heroic encounter. Instead of the heroic and supernatural bravery displayed by Mofolo's Chaka in a similar lion-episode, Plaatje's anti-epic hero drives the lion away by yelling at it like a girl! The frightened (or perhaps surprised) lion runs away, 'leaving Ra-Thaga complete master of the situation' (p.36). But his mastery is far from credible and Ra-Thaga's claim to 'heroic status' is thus ridiculed. The dent in his stature is then further aggravated by another direct reference to his timidity:

> A shudder went through him as he saw them [lions] sauntering about the place, examining the ground and smelling at the few eland bones left about. ... What was to be done? For the first time since the forest home was planned, Ra-Thaga felt helpless and afraid. (p.62)

The reader gets a distinct impression that the epic and legendary heroism enshrined in the traditional African heritage is under a relentlessly satirical attack in Plaatje's *Mhudi*. Plaatje's overwhelming portrayal of Ra-Thaga's anti-heroic stature amounts to a parodic and a caricature of the epic hero. Since parody embodies critique, Plaatje's ingenious use of the parodist-cum-satiric amounts to a brilliant stylistic weaponry which conceals his criticism of the Barolong (and African) addiction to legendary traditions, allowing the sardonically humorous and the romantically facile impulses to manifest themselves at the literal level. But what is pertinent to this study is the fact that Plaatje's stylistic artistry constitutes another dimension of the multi-layered attack on the traditionally bombastic heroism as symbolized by warrior-kingship rituals practised by the Matabele. Plaatje achieves this by skilfully caricaturing and sneering at Ra-Thaga's absurd mimicry of the role of the legendary hero. Ra-Thaga's persistently ludicrous aping of the epic hero's image presages the text's final satirical assault on the epitome of the African legendary tradition in this novel: Emperor Mzilikazi of the ferocious Matabele.

The novel's demolition of the legendary historical image of African warrior-kings symbolized by Mzilikazi is mainly achieved by its intricate manipulation of a subtle subversive humour which sneers at 'wondrous heroic' actions, transformed into empty and pompous falsehoods. Thus Ra-Thaga, unwittingly, becomes the pathetic double of Mzilikazi. The reader is constantly reminded of man's ridiculous attempts to inflate his self-importance by emulating the omnipotent and the legendary. The male obsession with martial and heroic glory is further isolated for ridicule when we are told that Ra-Thaga shows off the scars from a tiger attack. The narrator tells us that 'In subsequent years', the far

from conventionally brave Ra-Thaga 'often referred with pride to the scars on his face, adding bravely that none could be found upon his back' (p.80), suggesting that he never turned his back to the tiger in fear. Though it is Ra-Thaga who is indicted for narcissism and the propensity for flattery and self-deification, the novel's intended purpose is to universalize the condemnation of male self-indulgence, epitomised in Mzilikazi's court.

The novel's dual vision, which consists in antithetical discourse crafted around Mhudi's epic heroism versus Ra-Thaga's anti-epic portrayal, is highlighted in two incidents in which Plaatje puts words that acknowledge the fight for epic heroic grandeur between man and woman into the mouths of Ra-Thaga and Mhudi. In the heated debate between them on whether Mzilikazi and his warriors were justified in destroying an entire Barolong community simply because two Matabele tax-collectors had been murdered by the Barolong Chief, Tauana, Ra-Thaga defends the Matabele, arguing that war is the universal and traditional instrument of settling human conflicts, while Mhudi vehemently discounts this view. In her contemptuous dismissal of Ra-Thaga's advocacy of war, Mhudi extends her censure to cover men's fixation with violence and carnage in general, pointing out her disillusionment with men. 'I used to have a high respect for the sense of men,' she declares disappointedly, 'especially your sense, Ra-Thaga; but I am beginning to change my good opinion of them' (p.67). These conflicting views not only accentuate the war and peace or the legendary and anti-legendary heroism debate in the novel, but they also enhance its historical objectivity - an ingenious creative ploy. This is achieved through the text's presentation of the two major opposing viewpoints: those of the Barolong and the Matabele. Besides this, the war-peace debate also projects the historical and the existential realism of war, which remains

the final arbiter in resolving disputes which defy peaceful solutions.

The most graphic illustration of Ra-Thaga's explicit acknowledgement of Mhudi's subversion of his heroic stature is the episode in which Mhudi arrives in the battlefield in search of her wounded husband. Using the technique of omniscient narration, Plaatje's narrator exposes Ra-Thaga's inner feelings by asserting that Ra-Thaga '... found himself repressing a feeling of anger.' The omniscient narrator then adds: 'He [Ra-Thaga] inwardly *resented her appearance, because he feared that he would in future be chaffed by other men and called the poltroon who took his wife to war'* (p.161, my emphasis). What is ironic here is the fact that Ra-Thaga is afraid of the effect this would have on the heroic image which the reader already knows he lacks. The coda to this event, however, only comes later in the episode when Ra-Thaga hurls a blatant verbal attack at Mhudi for daring to come to the battle-field, traditionally reserved for men:

> Ra-Thaga, still carrying his arm in a sling, came up to the wagon and, hiding these feelings, affectionately greeted his wife. "Have you come to show us how to kill the Matabele, Mhudi? Could you not have trusted us men to do the work to your satisfaction?" (p.161)

Ra-Thaga's veiled but unambiguous questions suggest that he is aware of the symbolic battle between him and his wife, whose recurrent actions constantly expose men's and particularly his own heroic image as false and pretentious. This is also an authorial stamp that alerts the reader's attention to the fundamental concern of the novel. In traditional Africa, women who attempt to play the roles that are traditionally reserved for men, are often ridiculed. Among the Ewes of West Africa, for example, this female assault on male prerogative is often

lambasted by men in a proverbial saying which sneers at 'any woman who tries to urinate like a man'. It is this viewpoint, coupled with the attendant threat to his male ego, which Ra-Thaga's invective against Mhudi conveys. Concealed, however, beneath this narrative structure, is Ra-Thaga's anti-heroic posture as epitomized by his unsuccessful attempt to repress his anger.

The text submits male self-glorification and proprietary control over heroism in traditional Africa to further divestment when the visionary attributes of Ra-Thaga and Mhudi are compared. The epic hero or heroine is always presented as a multi-gifted person. Whereas Mhudi is portrayed as an epic heroine equipped with supernatural intuition and vision, Ra-Thaga is painted as an anti-epic hero devoid of native wit and foresight. A classic episode which reveals this difference in outlook is the event in which Ra-Thaga sees six black-maned lions at a distance and erroneously thinks they are human beings carrying faggots. But the sharp-witted Mhudi makes him realize that it is unlikely for human beings to be found collecting fire-wood in an uninhabited countryside. The other evidence of the heroine's amazing intelligence and foresightedness is her ability to see through the villainous Qoranna headman, Ton-Qon. Mhudi advises the gullible Ra-Thaga not to go with the team of Qoranna hunters led by Ton-Qon whom she strongly believes is an evil man. But the short-sighted Ra-Thaga, who wants to assert his male ego, allows himself to be misled by the Tswana proverb which says, 'Never be led by a female lest thou fall over a precipice' (p.73). Ra-Thaga, therefore, joins the hunting party and is almost killed by a tiger when Ton-Qon, who is armed with a gun, deliberately deserts him as soon as they sight the beast. Ra-Thaga, who is seriously mauled by the tiger, is saved by Mhudi, his ever

perceptive wife. Having escaped the carnal clutches of the evil Ton-Qon, who tries to rape her, Mhudi is goaded by her extraordinary intuition into going after her hapless husband. This is not simply a question of female instinct, but an intimation that Mhudi is a heroine endowed with supernatural vision. Thus Mhudi's initial suspicion that Boers might turn out to be more ruthless than the Matabele is also finally confirmed.

Plaatje's manipulation of oral epic heroism is obviously determined by his creative purpose: to subvert the African warrior-kingship rituals exemplified by Mzilikazi's court. By repeatedly satirizing Ra-Thaga's ludicrous heroic exploits, Plaatje prepares the reader for his final and virulent assault on the images of Mzilikazi and traditional Africa. The portraits of Mhudi and Ra-Thaga - the brave, sharp-witted epic heroine and the humorous and rather timid, visionless, hero - do not fit into the African heroic oral epic mould. Instead of the traditional concept in which the man plays the role of the supernatural epic hero who protects the woman - traditionally believed to be the weaker sex - here we have a situation in which the woman becomes the omniscient heroic figure who looks after the man. Joseph Campbell alludes to a similar heroic status-reversal in his work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, when he asserts that 'One of the best known and most charming examples of "difficult tasks" motif is that of Psyche's quest for her lost lover, Cupid. Here all the principal roles are reversed: instead of the lover trying to win his bride, it is the bride trying to win her lover ...' (1956:97). In *Mhudi*, though Ra-Thaga and Mhudi are already married, Campbell's insight clarifies Plaatje's revised notion of African traditional epic heroism. Mhudi's search for and rescue of her husband from Ton-Qon's death-trap during the

hunting expedition and her search for and discovery of Ra-Thaga on the battle-field substantiate this interpretation.

The assertion of this inversion does not suggest that there are no historical legendary warrior-queens in the annals of African history, for there are examples like Queen Anna Nzinga of the Angolan Kingdom of Matamba, who successfully thwarted the Portuguese conquest and take-over of Angola for fifty years; Yaa Asantewa of the Ashanti, who fought the British during the exile of Asantehene Agyeman Prempeh to the Seychelles; and the ferocious Queen MaNthatisi of the Batlokwa, who was a match for Southern African kings during the *difaqane*. But, until Plaatje's *Mhudi*, colonial Africa, I believe, did not consider famous female historical figures suitable subjects for epic novelistic histories.

One of the major topics which needs to be investigated is Plaatje's handling of the ideological debate concerning the neo-traditional African artist's attitudes towards the image of pre-colonial Africa. Plaatje's ambiguous creative attitude toward pre-European Africa stems from a creative dilemma which faces all artists who are products of colonisation. The problem is how to appropriate the colonial language and modes of literary production and make them do the postcolonial artist's bidding, carrying the burden of his nativist vision without his ideological position being compromised in any way or without his being unconsciously seduced by the internal cultural dynamics of the colonialist ideology which informs the imperialist heritage. Mazisi Kunene articulates this conflict as follows:

> The colonization of the African peoples' minds produced two reactions, one collaborative and another combative. The collaborative mind consciously and unconsciously accepted without question the claimed greatness of the colonizers.

> The more aggressive reaction assumed a posture of confrontation. Following colonization those adapting this posture used the same weapons as those used by the enemy ... The problem arose when it became necessary to borrow the foreign tools, namely, the language and the classificatory framework of what was then termed *civilization*. These combative African intellectuals were simply ill equipped for that task, for the obvious reason that to undertake such a task successfully one needs to operate from one's own base.
>
> (Mazisi Kunene, 1980:245).

Mazisi Kunene argues that although Plaatje 'belongs to the combative African tradition', he fails to appropriate the English language to do his bidding, to bear his traditional African burden. In short, he is seduced by 'the English language', which 'is an outlook, an outcome of several layers of cultural history and cultural psychology' (Kunene, 1980:245). The ambivalence revealed by Plaatje's project stems, according to Mazisi Kunene, from 'the author's indecision over whether to follow the English procedures of storytelling or the African' (Kunene, 1980:246). Kunene's observation reveals only a tip of the iceberg. Like Mofolo in *Chaka*, Plaatje's problem in *Mhudi* is the fact that, unlike Armah, who rejects African kingship totally, Plaatje questions only certain aspects of African kingship while celebrating isolated attributes he considers non-detrimental to the welfare of the larger African community. As already mentioned at the beginning of this chapter (see p.101), the problem is further complicated by the fact that Plaatje has to maintain a posture of Afrocentric patriotism, at the same time isolating and criticizing the weaknesses of Africa. The novel consciously or unconsciously highlights this inner conflict of the colonized artist in various ways.

Plaatje's own equivocal attitude to traditional Africa, which he both glorifies and condemns, is re-enacted by Mhudi's ambiguous

feelings toward the pristine values of Africa. Mhudi is both repulsed and attracted by the two opposing worlds of Africa: the male-dominated and martially-oriented traditional Africa and the idealistic Africa nourished by the aesthetic and ethical values of humane communal ideals. This ambivalence is powerfully conveyed in the incident in which we see Mhudi pretending to praise Ra-Thaga as a supernatural hero who is capable of all feats of valour while at the same time revealing her fear for his inability to ensure his own safety. In the episode in which Ra-Thaga is asked by Mhudi to do something about the lion she has seen and Ra-Thaga inquires whether she is afraid of coming with him to confront it (see p.113 above), Mhudi shifts into the role of the traditional woman who treats men as superior beings. She creates the ironic impression that no woman could ever be frightened of anything if she was in Ra-Thaga's company. We know, however, that whenever Ra-Thaga goes out into the veld in search of food, Mhudi becomes apprehensive. Thus Mhudi declares, accordingly: '"Why should I fear ... who would be afraid in your company, while fear is afraid of you?"' (p.62). This assertion reveals the guise which she assumes here - the guise of the docile traditional Africa woman who is expected to hero-worship men. This social role playing is sharply questioned by her instinctive reactions to Ra-Thaga's inability to ensure his own safety. The text highlights Mhudi's ambivalence by quickly negating her ritual act of reverence to the male ego. The novel's reversal of Mhudi's declaration of absolute faith in Ra-Thaga's heroic endowments is effected when the narrator self-consciously reveals, a paragraph later, that 'The juicy lerisho (a sort of wild turnip) and similar roots which formerly served as their vegetable food became scarce, as *his wife would not hear of his going out alone*, for whenever he did she could count the moments and work herself up into a frenzy until his return' (pp.62-63,

my emphasis). Clearly, this textual evidence intimates that Ra-Thaga is never safe unless he is accompanied by his wife, who is presented as his protector.

The reader is also aware that Plaatje's portraiture of Mhudi is contrary to that of the traditional African woman who always submits humbly to male domination. Mhudi's anti-traditional African attitudes include her rejection of polygamy; her contemptuous dismissal of Ra-Thaga's argument about the Matabele attack and destruction of the Barolong kingdom; and her frightening, lonely journey through the veld full of predators to the battle-field in search of her husband during the battle between the Matabele and the Boer-Barolong allies.

The cumulative effect of the text's manipulation of Ra-Thaga's anti-heroic portraiture suggests that there is a persistent and self-conscious attempt to present him as a caricature of the African epic hero. This caricaturist-cum-parodist mode is not only aimed at ridiculing the legendary tradition but also at redefining and restructuring the existing social order and traditional African epic heroism. The novel suggests that gender and flamboyant war-like antics should not determine heroism and social position in human societies. The legendary tradition which automatically projects men as heroes deserving to be hero-worshipped by the society, particularly by women, is scoffed at and dismissed as pretentious and hollow. This vision accounts for the novel's ironic treatment of Ra-Thaga, who is sneered at as an absurd caricature of the epic hero. Plaatje's vision would seem to comply with the current notion of democratization and gender parity.

The text advances the theme of the conflict between traditional African and colonialist Christian values. Plaatje's Africa is presented as a world plagued by huge contradictions. Though there is an undisguised veering from the core of traditional African values towards a European ethos, there are also occasional celebrations of facets of African traditions which Plaatje considers enlightened. The novel teems with textual evidence validating the interpretation that Plaatje condemns the traditional African concept of the subservience of women. In spite of the fact that traditional African male chauvinism, epitomized by Mzilikazi's court and Ton-Qon, is repudiated, it is also humorously treated in Chief Moroka's and Chief Massouw's kingdoms - a light-hearted delineation that contrasts with the virulent denunciation of the same social weaknesses in Mzilikazi's kingdom.

The servile role imposed upon the African woman by traditional Africa is exposed by the minor villain of the piece, Ton-Qon, 'the squint-eyed Qoranna headman whose reckless conversation and crude manners' (pp.72-73) whom Mhudi abhors. This is unveiled through the revelation of Ton-Qon's marital aspirations after is struck by Mhudi's unusual ability to brew beer after drinking 'quantities of berry-beer' brewed by Mhudi. The evil headman tells a group of people, including Ra-Thaga and Mhudi, that 'I was on my way to Kunana last year to marry a Rolong woman when news of the massacre of their women and annihilation of their men reached us. ... I was going to have a Qora wife to milk my cows and a Rolong wife to hoe the fields for corn seeds and brew beer' (p.72). These marital ambitions - and Ton-Qon's callous attempt to violate Mhudi sexually - support the interpretation that traditional Africa exploits women and treats them as sex objects and workhorses (p.74). *Mhudi* engages in an anti-traditional

discourse discounting the traditional African ethos which celebrates male heroism and dominance while relegating women to a subservient social status.

The novel's repudiation of the servitude and the brutalization of women in traditional Africa is further accentuated by linking the rites of passage of Mhudi with those of Umnandi, Mzilikazi's model queen, who is driven into exile through the machinations of her co-wife, the inordinately jealous Queen Nomenti. The novel portrays Umnandi as the embodiment of Matabele glory - 'the lily of' Mzilikazi's harem (p.91). That Umnandi, the symbol of Matabele marital splendour, is now a homeless exile because of polygamy confirms Plaatje's condemnation of the institution of polygamous marriage. Yet *Mhudi*'s treatment of the status of traditional African women is ambiguous. The text deploys two conflicting discourses that battle against each other: one celebrating the traditional role of the African woman and the other questioning it. The opening page of the novel romanticizes the role of women in traditional Africa:

> But woman's work was never out of season .... In addition to the inevitable cooking, basket-making, weaving and all the art-painting for mural decorations were done by women ....
> Fulfilling these multifarious duties of the household was not regarded as a drudgery by any means ... And the simple women of the tribes accepted wifehood and transacted their onerous duties with the same satisfaction and pride as an English artist would the job of conducting an orchestra. (pp.25-26)

The views of Mhudi and Umnandi, who represent a composite authorial seal in the novel, reject this burdensome role imposed upon the traditional African woman by the chauvinistic male society. In a reminiscence of pre-*difaqane* life in Kunana, Mhudi criticizes the traditions which subvert the ideals of the

institution of marriage by questioning the rationale behind polygamy and the duties imposed upon the male populace, including married men, by chiefs. After comparing her life of bliss in the wilderness - an idyllic setting where there is no interference from traditional social norms - with life in Kunana, she declares: 'What a boon to be able to speak to her husband alone all the time, to say nothing of running distant errands for chiefs ... or of game drives and political missions to neighbouring tribes' (p.60). In taking issue with polygamy in traditional Africa, Mhudi poses a question: 'Did they not say that man is by nature polygamous and could never be trusted to be true to only one wife?' Mhudi disagrees with the traditional view of man's innate polygamous character by asserting: 'But here is one as manly as you could wish, and I have never, never seen a husband of any number of wives as happy as mine is with me alone!' (p.61). This Eurocentric view challenges the rationale behind the polygamous marriage customs which are still observed in modern Africa. The import of this episode amounts, it appears, to a subtle upholding of colonialist Christian values against Black "pagan" values. The paradox of it all is a point made by Desmond Tutu in his article 'African Insights and the Old Testament' (1972:21) - the fact that the Israelites were not considered paganistic for practising polygamy. What is enigmatic and ambiguous is the fact that Plaatje puts into the mouth of Chief Moroka words which celebrate Hebrew polygamous kings, while questioning polygamy in another discourse (pp.61, 84) - a view fully dealt with later (see p.120 below).

Also levelled against traditional Africa by the text is the criticism that men refuse to recognise women as important communal role players. The novel constantly intimates that both Ra-Thaga and Mzilikazi would not have succeeded in attaining

their respective goals in life without the help of Mhudi and Umnandi. In the case of Ra-Thaga we are aware of how his life has been saved twice by his wife and how he is guided by her vision and intelligence throughout their married life. The novel's anti-traditional posture which celebrates the veneration of women in the traditional society at the expense of existing male self-indulgence is extended to cover the relationship between King Mzilikazi and his model wife, Queen Umnandi. Just as the traditional heroic roles of Ra-Thaga and Mhudi are reversed, turning Ra-Thaga (the expected epic hero and protector of the defenceless) into 'a weakling' who needs the protection of his heroic and brave wife, the roles of the omnipotent tyrant, Emperor Mzilikazi, and Queen Umnandi are reversed. The powerful Mzilikazi admits that his own survival and that of his kingdom mysteriously depend on Umnandi's many-sided and multi-gifted personality:

> He further thought of the still more mysterious disappearance of Umnandi, the jewel of bygone days, once so dear to his heart. "That daughter of Mzinyato ... was the mainstay of my throne. My greatness grew with the renown of her beauty, her wisdom and her stately reception of my guests. She vanished and, with her, the magic talisman of my court. She must have possessed the wand round which the pomp of Inzwinyani was twined, for the rise of my misfortune synchronized with her disappearance. Yet she was not the only wife of my harem. How came it about that all was centred in her? What was the secret of her strength? It is clear that calamities will continue to dog my footsteps until that wife is found ... I *shall* have her found. (p.172)

Umnandi 'had been [the] favourite wife of the great monarch whose ambition at one time was to make her the principal queen of the Matabele ...' (p.92). She is described as 'the offspring of lineage of brave warriors with many deeds of valour to their credit' (p.91) and 'the first Matabele with a human heart' (p.167). In spite of all these attributes, however, she is

depicted as insecure and plagued by the misfortune of childlessness and is finally driven into exile. Through his manipulation of this latent *ogbanje* motif, Plaatje intimates that Umnandi's human potentiality is thwarted by the tyrannical and polygamous structure of the Matabele kingdom. The text's deployment of Queen Umnandi's infertility serves two purposes: it indicts not only African warrior-kingship rituals and the institution of polygamous marriages embodied by Mzilikazi, but also reinforces the text's celebration of the European ethos which advocates monogamy. This confirms the view that there is a self-conscious revision of Black traditional values in *Mhudi* - a colonialist Christian posture which questions aspects of Black culture.

The conflict between the anti-heroic and the epic heroic as exemplified by the contrasting personalities of Ra-Thaga and Mhudi is now formally generalised to a male-female polarity. The novel dramatizes the view that traditional African women are more far-sighted than their men by exploiting a conversation between Mhudi and Umnandi. The novel's vilification of male prejudice in traditional Africa is corroborated by Mhudi's and Umnandi's comments on the male addiction to war. These two major female characters, portrayed as visionaries, reflect the views of the author who rejects war as an instrument for resolving human conflicts:

> "How wretched," cried Mhudi sorrowfully, "that men in whose counsels we have no share should constantly wage war, drain women's eyes of tears and saturate the earth with God's best creation - the blood of the sons of women. What will convince them of the worthlessness of this game, I wonder?"
>
> "Nothing, my sister,"moaned Umnandi with a sigh, "so long as there are two men left on earth there will be war." (p.165).

Here the novel reveals another twin set of conflicting narrative voices symbolized by the Mhudi-Umnandi and Mzilikazi-Langa-Boer polarities. The narrative voice which Mhudi and Umnandi embody is one of peace; but the voice of Mzilikazi, Prince Langa and the Boers is grounded on war and destruction. Besides the above juxtaposition of violence and peace, there is the thematic view that the Barolong, the Bechuana, the Basotho and the Qorannas are more peace-loving than the Matabele and the Boers. This peace-war polarity is often mirrored by another polarity: romanticization versus repudiation. To put it differently, those who call for peace are idealized while those who preach war are condemned. In this narrative dichotomy, the Matabele and the Boers are vilified while the Bechuana and the Barolong are idealized. The male addiction to self-grandeur and propensity for hollow pretensions is extended to cover the Boers. This view is easily confirmed by the legend which grows around de Villiers and Hannetjie's legendary constructs of Ra-Thaga and Mhudi at the close of the novel.

Talking to Ra-Thaga, Hannetjie re-enacts his anti-heroic image in completely altered garb:

> "Your boys should be proud of their parents, Ra-Thaga. You bear the scars of a tiger's claws on your face, a tiger's fangs on your arm and Mzilikazi's spear on your shoulder; and, although the wounds were inflicted far out in the wilderness, their mother turned up each time and nursed you back to health. I am glad to call you my husband's friends, but it will take me very long to forgive your refusal to remain with us". (p.186)

The second excerpt is a narratorial comment which paints the budding legendary heroic image of the young Boer hero, de Villiers:

> As for Hannetjie, she had been overjoyed by the arrival of de Villiers from the war. The sight of him surrounded by a company of elderly men who were voraciously devouring every

> word that fell from his lips, were an oracle, was glorious and all-engrossing. All the time that de Villiers was the centre of attraction she behaved like one treading on enchanted ground .... (p.182-183)

The Boer girl's sterling portrayal of Ra-Thaga in legendary terms appears to be a creative ploy designed to convey the view that Hannetjie's attitude to man's claim to superiority at the expense of the women conforms to the tradition which perceives men as epic heroes. Her romanticized constructs of Ra-Thaga and Mhudi are built upon real life experiences and not on the Qorannas' invented tales later explored in the chapter (see p.123 below). This suggests that the legendary tradition exercises a great influence over the Boer community as well. In other words, the novel generalizes the theme of male obsession with self-deification and ostentatious belligerence. The second quotation confirms that, as far as the status of men is concerned, the Boers are not in any way different from the Matabele they have just conquered and looted. De Villiers, in spite of the fact that he is considered to be "the only humane Boer at Moroka's Hoek" (p.183), is also projected as the representative of the Boer ethnic personality with all its shortcomings. Like Ra-Thaga, he is addicted to the desire to become a legend and Hannetjie, unlike Mhudi, genuinely worships the ground on which de Villiers walks.

The most problematic aspect of Plaatje's reconstruction of the *Difaqane*, however, is his ideological attitude to traditional Africa. Anyone who has read both Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* (1916), a fiery and militant political treatise which is solidly anchored within the anti-imperialist discourse, and *Mhudi* (1930), cannot help wondering whether the novel retains the

radical Afrocentric posture of the earlier work. Like Mofolo's *Chaka*, Plaatje's novel opens with a defiant anti-imperial rebuke:

> Strange to relate, these simple folk were perfectly happy without money and without silver watches. Abject poverty was practically unknown; they had no orphanages because there were no nameless babies. (p.27)

This stance which initiates *Mhudi* is ironically subverted by the novel's subsequent Eurocentric and anti-traditional biases. The novel's intrinsic African traditional background is undermined by its celebration of Judeo-Christian mythology and British cultural heritage. Its subversion of traditional Africa is achieved by the text's frequent veneration of Hebrew kings like David, Solomon, and 'King George of England'. One of the most graphic illustrations of *Mhudi*'s idealization of Jewish mythology is its linkage of the efficacy of African kingship rituals to how 'the children of Israel' gave God 'no rest until He anointed a king for them' (p.84). *Mhudi*'s romanticization of Jewish mythology and European culture at the expense of African traditions not only confirms the view that Plaatje's missionary background influences his creative vision, but it also weakens his visionary reconstruction of traditional Africa.

Let us reiterate Mazisi Kunene's explication of *Mhudi*'s incorporation of non-African values. According to Kunene (1980:245-246), Plaatje's assimilation of non-African traditions stems from the fact that he is a product of British colonization and has, therefore, been subconsciously influenced during the process of his use of the English language and its literary modes of presentation. I find Kunene's argument unconvincing. That Plaatje did not show the same "weakness" in his *Native Life in South Africa* (1916) suggests that the problem has to do with the difference in the thrust and the subject matter of his two works. In his first work there is no inner conflict because he deals

only with European-imposed tyranny and brutalization. In *Mhudi* the situation is completely reversed. The author is dealing with the oppression of his own people by Mzilikazi, the legendary tyrant who also symbolizes traditional Africa, which Plaatje loved. Plaatje's problem is compounded by the fact that he has to deal with the Boer-Barolong alliance against Mzilikazi while also castigating the Boers for their tyrannical treatment of Blacks. This already complex situation is further complicated by another creative requirement. In accordance with the prevailing Afrocentric ideological tradition, as articulated earlier by Kunene (1980), Plaatje is expected to celebrate what he considers to be the pristine African values - a constraint which is diametrically opposed to his creative task of repudiating Mzilikazi, who is celebrated by radical African intellectuals as the epitome of African legendary heroism.

The novel's juxtaposition of the bloodthirsty and tyrannical Matabele kingdom with the humane-oriented kingdoms of Chief Massouw of the Qorannas and Chief Moroka of the Barolong exposes more of the work's subversion of African traditions and its celebration of European values. In the hearing of the case in which Ton-Qon tries to kill Ra-Thaga so that he could marry Mhudi, Chief Massouw reveals the principles of equality before the law as the fundamental cornerstone of his kingdom. We are told that during the trial 'of an important leader of their tribe', Ton-Qon, 'The tribesmen descanted at the court on the mean treachery of which he had been guilty, and if the crime went unredressed, they argued, the life of the husband of a beautiful woman would "*not be worth the value of a mouse skin!*" (p.79, my emphasis). The fact that 'Ton-Qon tendered bribes, and tried every kind of persuasion to hush-up the matter, but the Qorannas

would not yield to him' confirms the high standard of equal justice practised by the Qorannas.

But Chief Massouw's allusion to the British missionary, Robert Moffat, as the source of his humane and enlightened approach to meting out punishment amounts to an indictment of traditional Africa where, it is intimated, barbarous punishments are meted out to those who break ethnic taboos. The Qoranna chief's veneration of all forms of life is directly opposite to that of Mzilikazi's kingdom where gratuitous murders and brutal punishments are the norm. Chief Massouw's concluding remarks at the trial of Ton-Qon reveal the difference between the tyrannical kingdom of the Matabeles and the democratically-based world of the Qorannas:

> Anyone capable of such black-guardly actions might come out in the night and kill me during my sleep. So let it be understood that every person in my dominion, whether a Bldi, a Hottentot, a Griqua or anything else, is one of us. My home is his home, my lands are his lands, my cattle are his cattle, and my law is his shield. (p.80)

The villain is not only stripped of his position as a headman, but is also fined twenty head of cattle, and his horse, saddle, bridle and rifle are seized by the chief while Mhudi is compensated with ten cows. This demonstration of equality before the law would have amounted to a celebration of justice in non-warrior-oriented traditional Africa if Plaatje did not accredit Robert Moffat, the British missionary, as the source of this legal enlightenment. Giving the missionary the credit for the civilised judiciary and humane ways of punishing criminals in traditional Africa negates any expressed intention to celebrate the values of traditional Africa.

Plaatje also compares the court of Chief Moroka with that of Mzilikazi. In an incident in which a youth assaults another Morolong, severely wounding him, Chief Moroka declares that 'We abhor human blood ... Let it be known that we Barolong abominate human blood in any form'. The Barolong chief asserts that 'In future, anyone spoiling for human blood may go and join the Matabele, and there slake his thirst for blood' (p.106).

Plaatje's purpose in constructing two conflicting narrative voices of epic heroism is revealed in his manipulation of the way myths and legends are created. Plaatje demystifies what, for lack of a better expression, might be termed 'meta-orality' - critique and parody of the coming into being of legends and myths. The fantastic tales about the epic heroism of Ra-Thaga and Mhudi, which are invented by Qoranna gossipers, amount to a marvellous creative ploy. The aim of this is to draw the reader's attention to the postulate that the fabulous legends of supernatural warrior-kings of Africa are nothing but fantastic fabrications. This evokes an oblique sneer at the legendary image of Mzilikazi - the projected representative of the legendary tradition in the text. Since African oral history is built around legends and myths, the text's criticism of these amounts to a subversion of the core of African traditional history as well as the traditions of African oral art:

> Thus Mhudi also became the talk of the people and many were the yarns spun concerning the two supernatural Bldis, as the Qorannas call the Bechuana. Anecdotes in the history of the strangers were related and exaggerated with each repetition. Gossipers wagged their tongues and twisted the story about. Some reported that Ton-Qon's party had returned with ten hides of lions killed single-handed by Mhudi, while the hunters could not bring back the pile of skins of other lions and tigers killed by Ra-Thaga. One chatterer had ocular testimony of what he said, for he "saw the lions' skins in a hut at the chief's court." (p.73)

Through this creative device Plaatje questions the heroic and legendary stature of heroes like Shaka and Mzilikazi. The other tale which recounts how Ra-Thaga singlehandedly 'vanquished the armies of Mzilikazi after all the Barolong were slain and rescued his beautiful wife who was a captive among the Matabele' (p.73) is another creative ploy crafted to disillusion the reader about the veracity of legends. Since Plaatje unambiguously portrays Moshoeshoe and Moroka as model chiefs, there is the intimation that the definition of the African legendary hero has been revised by the novel. The devastating effects of the *difaqane* obviously affect Plaatje's hostile attitude towards Mzilikazi. One is forced to recognize the fact that celebratory novels which romanticize Africa's image only appeared on the African literary scene after the sixties. *Mhudi* is a novel of its time - the neo-traditional novel which is largely shaped and influenced by ethnicity or ethnic hostilities, colonialist Christian values and the missionary publishing system which Plaatje had to use.

The question which readily comes to mind is: what is the relevant criterion for assessing epic and legendary heroism in Plaatje's Africa? Like Mofolo, Plaatje suggests that brute prowess and military glory per se do not amount to epic heroism. Legendary heroic status, it is suggested, should only be conferred on those who improve the quality of life of the larger community without the senseless destruction of human life. Plaatje's accommodating attitude towards colonialist Christian values conforms to the general trend in colonial Africa. A casual analysis of the colonial history of Africa reveals that the strength of the pre-European African nations and empires determined their responses to the European invasion and colonization. The powerful martially-oriented empires bravely fought the foreign invaders in order to defend their sovereignty. However, the weak ethnic

groups which were constantly raided and preyed upon by the ferocious war-like kingdoms quickly embraced colonialist Christian values. Through this assimilation of European ethos, they hoped to protect themselves against the destructive impulses of indigenous tyrants who had brutalized them for centuries. This ethnic nationalism emerges as one of the influences at work on Plaatje - one of the motivations for writing *Mhudi*.

One of the classic examples of the use of assimilation of the European and colonialist Christian ethos as a protective measure against powerful indigenous neighbours is how Moroka expropriated King Moshoeshoe's land around Thaba Nchu through the help of Wesleyan missionaries (see pp.129-130). This hypothesis is further validated by the Fingo (Mfengu) ready acceptance of European ideas and the protective stance adopted by the British towards them *vis-a-vis* the Xhosa. The determined and spirited attempt made by the British colonial government to create Queen Adelaide Province in the Transkei for the Fingo, clearly substantiates this interpretation (Omer-Cooper, 1966:165-168). The overt enthusiasm displayed by Africa's weak ethnic groups towards the European ethos stems from a historical legacy of tribal wars in which the powerful warrior-kings turned their weak kith and kin into conquered and servile vassal communities. My analysis of the colonial history of Ghana also shows that while the Fante quickly embraced the European ethos as a protective measure against the powerful and belligerent Asante, anglicizing their Akan names during the process of assimilation, the Asante fought the British for over seventy-five years before they were finally subdued and declared a protectorate. Kwame Arhin articulates this view cogently when he asserts that the Fante and the Asante have conflicting views on the concept of the ideal or admirable man. The ideal man among the Fantes, Arhin argues, is

the highly educated man who is the epitome of civilized European culture while ideal man among the Asante is the traditional chief, *ohene* (Arhin, 1983:2). This variation in attitudes to the colonialist Christian ethos and traditional African values between the Fante and the Asante of Ghana confirms the dissimilar attitudes of Sotho/Tswana and the Nguni of Southern Africa. Thus, it must be reiterated, assimilation of European and Christian values becomes an ideological weapon against the tyrannical impulses of the god-like kings who turned these weak ethnic groups into a battleground.

Mhudi, however, juxtaposes the above anti-traditional African discourse with an Afrocentric discourse which celebrates some facets of African orature and the traditional African way of life. The events dealing with Chief Moroka's court are structured around African orality and traditions. The section of the novel which incorporates a massive dose of African oral stylistic techniques is the debate on whether the Barolong, led by Chief Moroka, should join the Boers in fighting Mzilikazi:

> One grizzly old man with small jaws and very short teeth, touching his shins, said : "Oh that I could infuse some youth into these old bones and raise my shield! I would march against the vampires with a spear in hand. Then Mzilikazi would know that among the Barolong there was a man named Nakedi - just as the pack of lions at Mafika-Kgocoana knew to their cost." (p. 110)
>
> 'Men of the Barolong ... listen! Old men say that "the foolish dam suckles her young while lying down; but the wise dam suckles hers standing up and looking out for approaching hunters."' (p. 112)

One gets the distinct impression that Plaatje is attempting to root his novel in African oral traditions while at the same time rejecting those features of traditional Africa that he considers unsuitable for his revisionist approach. We have noticed (see

p.123 above) how myths and legends are rejected as mere fantasies. In the sylvan part of the novel, which deals with Mhudi's and Ra-Thaga's life in the wilderness - 'Re-Nosi' (p.60) - where their survival depends on their ability to subsist on nature, Plaatje recreates the era of food-gathering in prehistoric Africa. Subsisting on the bounty of nature - 'berry-beer', 'the juicy lerisho (a sort of wild turnip) and similar roots' (p.62) and game meat - is romanticized. The text's evocation of the bucolic is a creative re-enactment of the nostalgic image of peace and simplicity of primitive Africa, which radical African intellectual tradition perceives as an endorsement of the colonial image of the dark continent's racial infancy. This narrative mode, which idealizes the primitivism of pre-colonial Africa, appears to be a mimicry of classical pastoralism of European fiction. The author juxtaposes this romanticized prehistoric primitive lifestyle with the Matabele habit of eating offal - a dietary culture which is considered primitive and repulsive!

Besides romanticizing pre-*difaqane* pastoral life, the other aspect of traditional African heritage which is idealized is herbal healing. The reader is told how Mhudi is cured of malaria fever by drinking a herbal medicine prepared by Ra-Thaga from 'the *longana* (wormwood) bush' which 'served as a tonic and cure for every ailment' (p.63). The novel is very selective in deciding on which features of the traditional African ethos merit either exaltation or denigration. African cultural attributes which are irreconcilable with colonialist Christian values are rejected as detrimental to the larger community.

Closely related to the physical curative means are the spiritual elements and the powers of mystical healing. These facets of

African traditional healing are celebrated among the Barolong and denigrated among the Matabeles. Plaatje effects his vilification of the Matabele and the idealization of the Barolong by using two separate terminologies to describe the same practices. In the kingdom of the Matabeles, the text condemns healing through the medium of the Black occult arts by deploying derogatory terms to describe these same practices that are romanticized among the Barolong. Through this verbal signification Plaatje stigmatises those cultural facets of Africa which are considered Black 'pagan' practices in the colonialist Christian setting. In the Barolong community, however, Mhudi's cure by the traditional *inyangas* is revered. The reader is told that 'Old women came to massage her [Mhudi], and *herbalists cast bones and consulted them on her illness* ...' (p.151, my emphasis). The primitive-civilized dichotomy is evoked by using the neutral word 'herbalists' in the context of Moroka's kingdom and derogatory terms like 'magicians', 'witch-doctors', 'wizards' and 'sorcerers' in reference to Mzilikazi's kingdom for the same practitioners of mystical and herbal healing. The text appears to be questioning the metaphysics of African healing and divination. *Mhudi* criticizes the mystical and occult practices, commonly used in martially-oriented kingship rituals for enhancing human strength because these aggravate despotism and the wanton killing of the innocent. It is reasonable to assume that Plaatje has revised the notion of healing in accordance with his Christian values.

Through this stylistic technique Plaatje succeeds in portraying Mzilikazi's kingdom in negative terms by representing it as a primitive community wallowing in Black cabalistic arts and bloodletting. A graphic example of this is revealed in the text's delineation of Mzilikazi's reaction to his army's defeat by

Bangwaketse in the Kalahari desert. The narrator tells us that Mzilikazi ordered his '*magicians*' and '*bone-throwers*' 'to divine the cause of this unusual calamity' (p.98). The outcome of the oracle, we are told, upsets Mzilikazi so badly that he gives the diviners three days to find an antidote for the mysterious barrage of calamities which dog his kingdom. The novel intimates that decisions in Mzilikazi's kingdom, unlike those in Moroka's and Massouw's kingdoms where reason predominates, depend on the divination of oracles, 'magicians' and 'bone-throwers':

> Magicians promptly set to work. Sacrifices were made and all kinds of charms were burnt. Incantations and - praises of the king were profusely and vociferously sung, while the men tested their shields and spears and chanted the ancient Zulu war songs. (pp.167-168)

The suggestion that the Matabele are still governed by irrational and supernatural impulses while the Barolong and Griquas, influenced by colonial Christian ethos, have veered away from these unwholesome pre-colonial cultural practices, is another creative ploy designed to enhance the romanticization of the Barolong and the vilification of the Matabeles. The notions the novel is actually condemning here are what Plaatje sees as pre-European African "pagan" cabalistic practices. It must be pointed out, however, that this difference in attitude to the Christian ethos between the Matabele on one hand and the Barolong and Tswana on the other conforms to Africa's colonial experience and the diverse responses of the African ethnic groups to the European colonization of Africa. Writing under the guise of the neo-traditional artist intent upon redefining African cultural values, Plaatje criticizes aspects of the African heritage that he considers primitive and detrimental to the welfare of the larger community. Like his re-definition of the legendary hero, the author remodels the metaphysics of African healing culture, repudiating witchcraft and sorcery but sanctioning and

celebrating traditional herbal remedies which are beneficial to the general welfare of Africa. To intensify its subversion of the Matabele and idealization of the Barolong, *Mhudi* adopts a selective manipulation of Africa's ethnohistory.

Clearly, Plaatje is influenced by colonialist Christian values. This becomes evident when all the odd pieces of his selective manipulation of the *difaqane* are pulled out and weighed. The most important textual proof of this view is the fact that the author adopts a revisionist approach to history by romanticizing the Barolong and the Bechuana tribes, which have embraced Christianity, and vilifying the belligerently-structured Matabele kingdom, which needed no missionary protection against its enemies, for following moribund pre-European African cultural ways, perceived as primitive and detrimental to the larger community. It is contended that Plaatje's version of this period does not conform entirely with recorded history. The historical Mzilikazi, for example, was known to have had an intimate relationship with Robert Moffat, the British missionary. It is also historically unrealistic to suggest that witchcraft and sorcery were practised only by the Matabeles and the Zulus during the period of the *difaqane*. The ethnic communities which embraced Christianity were bound to minimize these 'heathen practices'. But to suggest that such unwholesome traditional ways of life had been stamped out among Christian-oriented African societies is unhistorical, for they are still practised all over Africa to this day.

In an episode in which the Matabele army defeats an advance party of Boers, Barolong and Griquas in Matabeleland, the novel intensifies its castigation of the image of the Matabele by portraying them as savages and pagans whose life is dominated by

diabolical acts of witchcraft and sorcery. This image of disfigurement is evoked when the Matabele warriors are said to have promptly removed the hearts of their dead foes for the preparation of talismans and *muti* for the Matabele army. The novel also confirms this view when Moshoeshoe sends the defeated Matabele warriors a gift of cattle. The sorcery-oriented warriors perceive Moshoeshoe's diplomacy as sorcery. The Matabele warriors, the reader is told, '... wondered if this was not a new and unheard of form of sorcery, for they had never heard that after being put to flight, a beaten enemy was ever supplied with provisions' (p.136).

King Moshoeshoe's magnanimous treatment of the vanquished Matabele warriors exposes another facet of Plaatje's re-interpretation of the South African historical experience, and in particular the novel's recommendation of humane kingship symbolized by King Moshoeshoe. Like Mofolo, Plaatje portrays Moshoeshoe of the Basotho as the paragon of humane African kingship and Mzilikazi as his foil: an evil bloodthirsty king without any redeeming qualities. The novel describes Moshoeshoe's gift of cattle to the defeated Matabele warriors as 'magnanimity' that 'had no parallel in the history of native warfare'. The outcome of this diplomatic coup, the narrator tells us, is that 'For a generation thereafter it was a by-word among the Matabele that Moshueshue [Moshoeshoe], the Basuto king, was an enigma, and nobody would dare think of doing harm to any of his people' (p.136).

Both the Boers and the Barolong confirm the visionary and sterling attributes of King Moshoeshoe. Sarel Cilliers praises the Basotho king's reputation for 'fair dealing and sound judgement' (p.84), while Chief Moroka declares: 'it is a pity

that men are not like cattle or Moshueshue would be set apart to propagate noble rulers much the same as we do with bulls' (p.86). Moroka's insight intimates that it is ironic that Africa is capable of improving the quality of her cattle by mating the pedigree bull(s) with the sterling cows, but she cannot improve her 'stock of despotic and cruel notables' by mating the Moshoeshoes with, say, the Umnandis and the Mhudis. It is this romanticized portrait of Moshoeshoe as the epitome of peace, cunning, and diplomacy that is the kind of legendary heroic stature which both Mofolo and Plaatje appear to recommend.

This anti-warrior kingship initiated by Mofolo and further elaborated upon by Plaatje, is pushed to its logical conclusion in Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*, which contemptuously reject all facets of African kingship because they are perceived as alien in origin. However, *Mhudi*'s idealized images of Chief Moroka and King Moshoeshoe are not wholly reconcilable with recorded history. As J.D. Omer-Cooper shows in his *The Zulu Aftermath* (1966:104-105), Chief Moroka of the Barolong and King Moshoeshoe resorted to war just like other warrior-kings. Chief Moroka, aided by Wesleyan missionaries, seized the land around Thaba Nchu temporarily allotted to him by the Basuto king on the understanding that he would be a vassal under King Moshoeshoe. The two kings fought over Thaba Nchu and finally Warden, the British colonial agent, having been influenced by the Wesleyan missionaries, drew a new boundary giving this disputed land to Chief Moroka. This again rehearses the ideological and political expediency of the need to embrace the colonial and Christian ethos which was adopted by weak African kinglets in their fight for survival against the more powerful indigenous kingdoms.

The novel magnifies its repudiation of Mzilikazi by emphasizing the two different notions of legendary heroism among the Barolong and the Matabele. The text's juxtaposition of the portraits of Moroka and Massouw with those of Mzilikazi and Langa unveils Plaatje's creative intention. The text's portraits of Langa and Mzilikazi are diametrically opposed to those of the humane kings, Moroka and Massouw:

> ... Langa, second living son of Mzilikazi - an impetuous youth, very jealous of the dignity pertaining to his station. Despite his extreme youth, he had several times vowed to wage war against his people if, on the death of his father, they attempted to pass him over in favour of his elder half-brother of another house. (p.49)

The narrative voice which deals with Langa intimates that he is an egomaniac, vying for his father's throne. Langa, the epitome of the martially-oriented and vainglorious epic hero who is obsessively conscious of his own omnipotence and is already addicted to self-deification, arrives with his own *iimbongi* who shower him with praises. Though this flamboyant glorification of the epic hero conforms to African oral epic aesthetics, it is ridiculed and rejected by Plaatje because it is perceived to be one of the root causes of Africa's political culture of tyranny and sycophancy:

> Suddenly King Mzilikazi gave a signal, and the dancing and the singing in the inner circle ceased; far away in the distant outskirts of the city was to be heard a swelling chant mingled with the rumble of tom-toms; ever louder and louder droned the *barbaric music* - the victorious army of Langa was returning; the victorious army from Kunana laden with spoils of victory. As they entered the great enclosure, the home regiments squeezed aside and prepared a way for Langa and his regiments to approach the king. *The newcomers had their own iimbongi who loudly proclaimed the latest success that the youth army had scored for Matabele arms.* (p. 52, my emphasis)

The declaration that Langa has engaged the services of the *iimbongi* to sing his praises prompts the novel's repudiation of this young warrior, masquerading as a model epic hero. The reader is alerted to the fact that at his age, Langa is already addicted to self-deification. The stylistic patterning adopted by Plaatje to achieve his aim echoes that of Mofolo in *Chaka* and is elaborated upon in Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*, Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*. Just as the youthful Chaka is obliquely criticized by Mofolo when his praises are sung by girls and women, Langa's glorification by young girls for his heroic victory over the Barolong is also condemned. The narrator tells us that 'Beside the numerous fireplaces in the courtyards, groups of shimmying girls sang the praises of Langa, high-born son of the Great One, and warbled national ditties to the glory of Matabele arms' (p.51). The overwhelming common preoccupation of the primary texts of this research is revealed by their persistent anti-legendary posture: their overt repudiation of praise singing (*izibongo*) which is a fundamental component of African epics. In his *Two Thousand Seasons* Armah lampoons the institutionalization of praise singing and hero-worshipping by the first 'philosopher-kings' of modern Africa, who adopted the pompous loud-sounding praise names designed to maximize their political power. Armah, Ouologuem and other modern African writers' preoccupation with this theme highlights Mofolo's and Plaatje's uncanny prophetic vision.

To underscore his condemnation of the political culture of despotism which reduces all members of the community to mere grovelling, Plaatje juxtaposes Mzilikazi's court, where tyranny rules, with the courts of the Qoranna chief Massouw and the Barolong King Moroka, where all actions are determined through a process of open democratic discussion. The low-keyed courts of Moroka and Massouw are compared with the institution of

flamboyance, hero-worshipping and martial ferocity in the kingdom of the Matabele. But in *Mhudi*, these qualities are condemned. These bombastic attributes and warrior-kingship rituals are repudiated even though they conform faithfully with traditional epic heroism. *Mhudi* argues that the destructive tribal wars of conquest and enslavement of the weak by the powerful as exemplified by Mzilikazi's entry into the festival grounds is fed by the hocus-pocus of legendary martial-kingship rituals:

> When Mzilikazi emerged from his dwelling, surrounded by his bodyguard and accompanied by his chiefs, arrayed in their brilliant tiger-skins, the effect of the recent victory was manifest by the satisfaction on every face. The appearance of the royal party was hailed with tumultuous shouts. The rattle of assegais on the shields rivalled even the rattle of a heavy hailstorm. The *court jesters* sang and leaped, bedecked in all manner of fantastic head-dresses, till the cat-tails round their loins literally whirled in the air. (p.50, my emphasis)

The narrator asserts that '... it was no uncommon thing for a joyous festival of this kind to end with a death sentence on anyone who might upset the uncertain temper of Mzilikazi the Terrible; therefore men grasped their shields and gripped their spears and stood erect, lest a faulty pose should irritate the eye and rouse the ire of the Great One' (p.50). This further confirms the novel's rejection of African warrior-kingship writ in blood and tyranny.

The significance of *izibongo* in Mzilikazi's kingdom is both highlighted and ridiculed by the text - a covert castigation which echoes Mofolo's subtle 'inverted' use of praise singing and hero-worshipping in *Chaka*. This view is confirmed by the sentence, 'The crowd stood breathless and at high tension, while court *jesters and imbongis were lauding the greatness of Mzilikazi and reciting the prowess and the deeds of valour*

associated with his ancestry' (p.50, my emphasis). The fact that this institutionalized praise-singing is completely absent in the courts of Chiefs Massouw and Moroka confirms Plaatje's condemnation of the *izibongo* as celebrated by kingship rituals. As in Mofolo's *Chaka,* the traditional purpose of using panegyric to glorify the image of the epic hero is reversed in *Mhudi*. Plaatje's inverted use of praise singing is not as elaborate and consistent as Mofolo's in *Chaka*. *Mhudi*, like *Chaka*, suggests that the Matabele traditional *iimbongi* have become impotent flatterers whose goal in life is merely to ward off Mzilikazi's tyrannical and unpredictable bursts of fury which often initiate senseless massacres. The *iimbongi*'s attempts to outdo each other is unmasked by the sentence, 'At this there was loud applause and several imbongis began to vie with one another in singing the praises of the king' (p.137).

Like Mofolo's *Chaka*, *Mhudi* romanticizes the pre-*difaqane* period in order to magnify Mzilikazi's destructive role in the Wars of Calamity. Plaatje opens the novel with an idyllic picture of 'the Bechuana tribes' who 'inhabited the extensive areas between Central Transvaal and the Kalahari Desert' two centuries ago (p.25). We are told that the peoples 'lived under their several chiefs who owed no allegiance to any king or emperor'. In this "Garden of Eden", 'Their cattle ... multiplied as prolifically as the wild animals of the day' and '... mother earth yielded her bounties and the maiden soil provided ample sustenance for man and beast' (p.25). Game was so plentiful during this period that hunters had no need to go far for meat. It is asserted that '... it was often easier to kill wild animals nearer home than to go to the often distant cattle-posts for meat. Very often the big game ran *thalala-motse*... when there would be systematic slaughter of antelopes and orgies of wild-beef eating' (p.27).

Though there was plenty of game to eat, the narrator adds that 'When the rainy season was good everyone had too much corn, and in years of drought the majority went short of porridge' (p.27). Mhudi, the epic heroine of the novel, reinforces the above pastoral bliss when she recalls the 'sweet life' of her 'childhood days' at Kunana (p.39). Apart from the scarcity of food experienced when drought sometimes made the tribes go without porridge, the abundance of game, the bounties of mother earth, the prolific productivity of their cattle and the fertility of their soil make Plaatje's pre-*difaqane* Southern Africa a veritable paradise. The novel contends that this utopian world is destroyed by Mzilikazi and his Matabele 'hordes':

> Upon these peaceful regions over one hundred years ago there descended one Mzilikazi, king of a ferocious tribe called the Matabele, a powerful usurper of determined character who by his sword proclaimed himself ruler over all the land. ... they advanced along both banks of the Vaal River, driving terror into man and beast... They continued their march very much like a swarm of locusts; scattering the Swazis, terrifying the Basuto and the Bapedi... and, trekking through the heart of the Transvaal, they eventually invaded Bechuanaland where they reduced the Natives to submission. (p.28).

This evocation of idyllic bliss is not consonant with the Black collective concept of Africa's Golden Age mapped out in Chapter 1. Besides this, though Plaatje clearly asserts that the pre-*difaqane* earthly heaven is destroyed by Mzilikazi, the novel's subsequent declaration that Mzilikazi does not dispossess the Barolong of their land or reduce them into slaves prepares us for a possible qualification of the work's original thesis. The vision of 'Garden of Eden' evoked here and the pastoral bliss of the petty countless clan-based chieftaincies in pre-*mfecane* era is not considered the Golden Age in Southern Africa. Only the period of great nations and empires, triggered by the *difaqane*, is recognized as the epitome of South African contribution to

pre-colonial African grandeur and splendour - the dark continent's golden age. To cite again from Mazisi Kunene, Plaatje's romanticized portrayal of the vision of innocence and the idyllic in the primitive life of the Barolong as the 'Garden of Eden' merely echoes the classical notion of the pastoralism and the nostalgia of "the old happy days of weak and countless primitive clans living in communal simplicity" which is dismissed as 'borrowed literary motifs that to Africans seem infantile' (1980:246). This perception confirms my opening submissions and definition of the Black African concept of the Golden Age. The European classical celebration of pastoral peace and simplicity projected above is more of a mimicry of the European classical notion of the mythical golden age than that of Africa. The African Golden Age is not generated by primitive clan-based idyllic bliss and eternal peace - a notion of innocence and paradise dismissed as Africa's racial infancy - but rather centred around the rise of great African empires.

Mhudi, which is a blend of history, romance and epic, appears to be leaning heavily on the romance mode in this section. Northrop Frye's explication of the attributes of romance in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) suggests the model which informs Plaatje's nostalgic reverie in his novel. Frye asserts:

> The romance is the nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfilment dream, and for that reason it has socially a curiously paradoxical role ... The perennially child-like quality of romance is marked by its extraordinary persistent nostalgia, its search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space ... the hero of romance is analogous to the mythical Messiah or deliverer who comes from an upper world, and his enemy is analogous to the demonic powers of a lower world.
>
> (Frye, 1957:186-187)

It appears that the ideals of the hero of romance also form part of Plaatje's heroic structure. Ra-Thaga and de Villiers consider themselves 'Messianic heroes' who rescue the Boers and the Barolong and Tswana people from 'the demonic powers' of Mzilikazi and his horde of warriors. But as usual, there is a concealed sardonic humour which sneers at the 'two heroes of romance', particularly Ra-Thaga. The text intimates that Ra-Thaga, instead of being the supernatural Messianic hero who saves the weak, is a weak and ineffectual anti-hero who is constantly rescued by Mhudi, who is portrayed as the authentic Messiah. Another insight evoked by the text's use of the romance mode is the intimation that the new heroic ideal recommended by the text seems to be akin to that of the hero of romance. Perhaps one could speculate that what we have here is a situation in which the text demolishes the traditional African notion of epic heroism and its attendant concept of Africa's Golden Age and attempts to fill the vacuum with a low-keyed communal heroic ideal which is similar to pastoral and bucolic bliss. Frederick Jameson questions Frye's thesis. In his 'Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre', Jameson declares that:

> Romance is for him [Frye] a wish fulfilment or utopian fantasy, which aims at the transfiguration of the world of everyday reality, whether in an effort to restore it to the condition of some lost Eden or to inaugurate and usher in some new and ultimate realm from which the old mortality and imperfections have been effaced ... So romance comes to be seen as the struggle between the higher and lower realms, between heaven and hell, or the angelic and the demonic or diabolic ....
>
> (Jameson, 1975:138-139)

Jameson's rejection of Frye's definition of 'the hero of romance' further clarifies Plaatje's manipulation of the romance mode. Jameson articulates the concept the hero of romance as it is projected in Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*

(1968:21-23) - a formulation which appears to evoke not only Plaatje's new conceptualized heroism, which replaces the bombastic traditional African epic hero, but also that of Mofolo. Jameson argues that Frye's "mythical Messiah or deliverer" is akin to what may be called 'a series of deeds: the hero is he who by his own action struggles and earns his victory or suffers his defeat, whose own feats are responsible for the regeneration and transfiguration of the fallen world, when that proves possible' (Jameson, 1975:139).

Mhudi's ambiguous and ironic treatment of the Boer-Barolong alliance and its aftermath, and its manipulation of Halley's Comet coupled with the series of prophecies which dominate this work (Mzilikazi's prophecy, for instance) appears to subvert its own vision of the pre-*difaqane era* being the paradise -'the Garden of Eden' - that was destroyed by Mzilikazi. The novel contrasts the intensity of the Matabele destructiveness of man and his world with that of the Boers. It is argued that the pre-*mfecane* pastoral paradise of primeval peace that is depicted in the text - 'the pre-*difaqane* Garden of Eden' - is symbolically demolished by the cosmic devastation which is unleashed when the Boers introduce gun warfare. It seems that Plaatje's delineation of this period as paradisal is purely an ideological stance that is necessitated by his creative aim. Plaatje's deconstructed version of the pre-*difaqane* era as 'the idyll of an innocent, golden Edenic Africa' is a creative ploy which mimics the narrative mode of romance and 'exists only at the level of nostalgic reverie' (Wright, 1985:86). The African primeval innocence and bliss - a vision which is contrary to the pre-colonial Golden Age - was shattered by the European discovery, invasion, and colonisation of Africa, ushering in its attendant colonialist Christian values. The narrative mode of pastoralism

and innocence that is projected in the novel is scoffed at by the radical African intellectual tradition which perceives it as a mere echo of the colonialist image of Africa's racial infancy.

Mhudi presents colonial Africa as a world beyond human redemption. The cycle of disasters which plague this world endorses this view. The Barolong establish an alliance with the Boers with the sole purpose of recovering their land from the Matabele so that Chief Tauana can rebuild his capital, Kunana, and Chief Moroka can retain the land around Thaba Nchu (pp.141-142). But the reverse happens: though the Barolong help the Boers in defeating and pushing Mzilikazi and the Matabele back into what constitutes modern Zimbabwe, the Barolong finally lose all their land to the Boers who change from allies to rulers. To highlight this cruel paradox, the text juxtaposes the status of the Barolong under Matabele overlordship with the brutal Boer domination and its attendant dispossession of the Barolong. This, the novel suggests, amounts to an ironic reversal of the Barolong dream of recovering their land and their pre-*difaqane* autonomy. The reader is told that though the Barolong detest the primitive culture of Matabele, particularly the habit of 'walking about in their birthday garb', '... the Bechuana were left in undisturbed possession of their old homes and haunts ... as long as each chief paid taxes each spring time in acknowledgement of his fealty to Mzilikazi' (p.29). This suggests that life under the Matabele rule was not as harsh as we had been made to believe. Plaatje's condemnation appears to be centred more on the indiscriminate massacre of Barolong women, children and old men during the war of conquest than on the actual Matabele rule of the Bechuana tribes.

To drive home the horrors of the satanic slaughter of defenceless women and children, the novel presents the destruction of Kunana and the massacre of its inhabitants through eye-witnesses' reports in hyperbolic style. Ra-Thaga's chilling eye-witness report of the slaughter of women and children by the Matabele *impis* is intended to portray the terrors and the cruelties of this kind of kingship which, the novel maintains, turns human beings into 'beasts of prey':

> It was clear, from that moment, that the sun of the peacemaker had set, never to rise again, for by the faint light of the moon they noticed with horror that the Matabele were not fighting men only; they were actually spearing fleeing women and children. Ra-Thaga saw one of them killing a woman and as she fell back, the man grasped her little baby and dashed its skull against the trunk of a tree .... and a Matabele withdrawing the assegai from the mother's side, pierced her child with it, and held the baby transfixed in the air. (p.32)

The gruesome details of this narrative evoke elements of epic horror. The stylistic patterning of the macabre appears to be meticulously tailor-made to crystallize the bloodthirstiness and the ruthlessness of the Matabele. The repulsiveness of the massacre of innocent children is aimed at assailing our sense of decency and humanity. The human beasts responsible for this atrocity are described as 'vultures thirsting for ... blood' (p.97). Plaatje, using Ra-Thaga as the focalizer, piles on gory detail after gory detail of the butchery of the Barolong by the Matabele. Ra-Thaga declares that '... the huts were full of dead bodies of friends and enemies, and many of our women and children'. Throughout the kingdom, Ra-Thaga concludes, 'The huts, cattlefold, like the whole terrain from Kunana to Mhuhucho, bore gruesome traces of the ravages of the Matabele in the shape of dead bodies, burnt huts and destroyed crops' (p.33). Lurking behind this narrative is the intimation that the Matabele

destruction of the Barolong communities will trigger a cycle of disasters, which may permanently shatter peace - making the sun, the symbol of life on the planet Earth, set for ever. The notion of the eternal banishment of peace is projected metaphorically as an abysmal darkness without the sun. This obviously links future infringements on peace with the massacre of the Barolong, and Plaatje's prophetic vision seems to anticipate the countless acts of human destruction which followed the Matabele massacre in the present endless violence in South Africa. This critical formulation is affirmed by the sentence fragment 'the sun of the peacemaker had set, never to rise again', an excerpt that also evokes the narrative mode of epic horror in its attempt to trigger our sense of revulsion at the fiendish barbarism displayed by the wanton butchery of children. The demonic savagery of the massacre of women and children exposes how war draws out the beast in man. Mhudi's eye-witness account of the ruthless slaughter confirms that of Ra-Thaga:

> A young mother and friend of mine ... gave me harrowing details of the attack. She herself had one of her breasts ripped open by one of the human vultures... She told me that the Matabele took her baby from her and dashed its head upon a rock till its brains bespattered those around. (p.40).

The novel portrays Mzilikazi and his impis as ferocious beasts devoid of any human feeling. Like Mofolo in his *Chaka*, Plaatje utilizes the hyperbolic in order to effect his vilification of the image of the Matabele. A casual comparison of recorded history, particularly the use of Moffat's *Matabele Journals* as Gerald Moore (1980: 248-249) has rightly suggested, will have revealed a more humane portrait of Mzilikazi than the one based on the Tswana ethnocentric myth of the Matabele king as a bloodthirsty tyrant devoid of any redeeming feature. Chief Moroka's view of the Matabele confirms that of his subjects. The

Barolong chief defines the ethnic character of the Matabele when the Boers ask him 'what kind of people are the Matabele' as follows:

> They go stark naked even in the presence of their children. They nearly always go barefooted. When they kill cattle or game they leave only the dung. They eat up every bit of the animal, *including the offal*. When they kill men, you will notice by the dead bodies that they are impartial in their killing. Old men, young women, boys, girls and babies - everybody is speared without discrimination. (p.86)

In order to represent the Matabele as barbarous people, Plaatje isolates aspects of traditional African culture that he regards as primitive and presents them as typical attributes of their ethnic character. It is common knowledge that Blacks, including modern educated ones, eat offal. The technique of selecting negative aspects of African culture and presenting them as primitive customs of one particular ethnic group - the Zulus - is also used by Mofolo. Plaatje employs the same device in vilifying the image of Mzilikazi and the Matabele.

Like Armah in *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*, Plaatje not only exposes the foulness of the African warrior-kingship but also castigates the tyrannical and hypocritical tendencies of the Boers who treat their allies like enemies. Thus the novel explodes three major myths: the legendary warrior grandeur of Mzilikazi and his impis, the civilized European and Christian superiority of the Boers and the Barolong myth. The Barolongs' dream of revenge against the Matabele; the recapture of their land and the restoration of their pre-*difaqane* clan-oriented autonomy celebrated as 'the Garden of Eden'; the dream of re-establishing their capital, Kunana; the hope of freedom to rule themselves in idyllic bliss - all this amounts to a wish-fulfilment of a nostalgic trip to primeval Africa, a utopian

ideal which evokes Mzilikazi's dream of building an empire which stretches to the coast. Like Mzilikazi's grand plan, the Barolong dream of permanent sovereignty and peace becomes a nightmare. To achieve these aims, the Barolong join the Boers against the Matabele. Mazisi Kunene confirms the view that Plaatje's creative purpose is not only to subvert Mzilikazi's legendary image but also to deflate Boer imperialist and racial superiority:

> I believe that Plaatje intended to use this story in an allegorical fashion to lampoon the white power structure. I also believe that he did this as an aside rather than as his central intention. Basically he wanted to tell a story about a notorious and skilful general whose raids on the Tswana had made him both hated and admired.
>
> (Kunene, 1980:246)

The oblique way in which Plaatje treats the Boer image in the novel leads Kunene to suggest that the author uses an allegorical mode in his attack on the Boers. Perhaps Plaatje does not see fit to launch a direct attack on the Boer power base after having devoted his first book to the Boer problem. The text unveils a network of factors which presage the impending disillusionment of the Barolong and the Tswana people: Black tribes will be brutalized, dispossessed of their land by the Boers and reduced to landless farm-hands and labourers. But this vision is not seen by anyone save Mhudi. Sarel Cilliers, the leader of the Boers who arrive in Thaba Nchu, tells Chief Moroka and his council of chiefs that they have left the Cape Province which was ruled by the British in order to find new homes where they could worship their God in peace and govern themselves. In reply to Chief Moroka's question, which asks why the Boers could not worship God at the Cape, Sarel Cilliers asserts:

> We could, ... but oppression is not conducive to piety. We are after freedom. The English laws of the Cape are not fair to us.
> ... We Boers are tired of foreign kings and rulers ... No man or woman can rule another. (pp.83-84)

What Plaatje is striving to drive home are the double standards and the racial bigotry of the Boers as revealed by Sarel Cilliers' answer. The text's anti-imperialist posture is directed at divesting the Boers of their superior airs and it effects this by exposing the hypocritical attribute of the Boer ethnic character. The novel draws the reader's attention to the fact that the Boers, who have left the Cape in order to rule themselves and are 'tired of foreign kings and rulers', deny Blacks the same basic political right to rule themselves and to worship their 'own God'. Just as Chief Moroka projects his own deconstructed ideological image of the Matabele, the novel sets out to paint the different ethnic images of the actors within this historical drama. The conversation between the Barolong ruling elite and the Boers reveals that one of the unstated concerns of the novel is to juxtapose the different destructive ethnic roles of the various actors who featured in the *difaqane* and the Great Trek.

Thus it appears the novel intends to project a multi-layered deconstructed version of the *mfecane* in which the devastating roles of the Matabele, the Boers, the Barolong and the Tswana people have participated. The Tswana and the Barolong hospitality, as exemplified by Moroka's willingness to share the bounty of the surrounding land with the Boers, is not reciprocated. This amiable disposition of the Barolong is conveyed by the following:

> ... the country round about was wide and there was plenty of land for all. There were ... plenty of lions and tigers, and smaller species of carnivora, all yielding valuable skins. (p.84)

This innate hospitality of the traditional African, who willingly shares his land with Boers, Plaatje intimates, is often rewarded

with ingratitude as the host is subsequently relegated to servitude. The theme of African naivete and gullibility - attributes which Armah's novels represent as 'indices of Black racial infancy' - permeate African writing. A fascinating illustration of this view is that Plaatje also indicts the Barolong's lack of vision for naively believing that the Boers would hand over the captured land to them once Mzilikazi was defeated and driven away from his kingdom. Plaatje's projection of this vision can be gleaned from two major situations: the naive attitude of the Barolong ruling elite who seriously believe that the alliance with the Boers would help them achieve their dreams and the juxtaposition of the naive anti-hero, Ra-Thaga, and the sharp-witted and visionary epic heroine, Mhudi. The most unambiguous confirmation of this view is Chief Moroka's reaction to the Boer arrival:

> This country is all right ... it has only one serious nuisance and that is, it is infested by Mzilikazi and his ferocious impis. *If you help us to rid the country of this pest, we could make it the happiest land under the sun.* If that came about, I too would turn a Christian .... (p.86, my emphasis)

Chief Moroka's words confirm the Barolong's gullibility. The ironic twist deployed by the novel here is that Chief Moroka is about to replace the Matabele 'pest' with the Boer 'pestilence': an expansionist conqueror for an invincible and more ruthless oppressor. It is intimated that Chief Moroka and the Barolong are unable to perceive that by helping the Boers drive away the Matabele, they are unwittingly and naively replacing a relatively containable local political power with a formidable foreign power armed with awesome death-dealing weapons which would render their spears obsolete. There is a veiled suggestion that the Barolong should be blamed for helping to entrench Boer power in the

Transvaal and the Orange Free State. The text suggests that the desire to avenge the destruction of Kunana and the massacre of their children and women deadens the Barolong's native wit. The outcome of this is that they allow themselves to be used by the Boers in defeating Mzilikazi and are themselves eventually colonised by the Boers.

The novel's elaborate juxtaposition of the dim-witted Ra-Thaga with the visionary Mhudi appears to be determined by a further creative aim. The intimation of the naivete of the colonial African traditional rulers as exemplified by their reaction to European occupation of Africa seems to be obliquely reaffirmed by the novel's manipulation of Ra-Thaga's naive impression of and friendship with the Boers, particularly with de Villiers. Ra-Thaga, the naive anti-hero, is projected not only as a caricature of the epic hero but also as a symbol of traditional African aristocracy - the absurd double of the legendary Mzilikazi. To translate this vision into fictional realism, Plaatje juxtaposes the point of view of the visionary and multi-gifted Mhudi with that of the pathetic anti-hero, Ra-Thaga.

In a sustained projection, the novel elaborates upon the theme of naivete by comparing Ra-Thaga's impression of the Voortrekkers with that of Mhudi. The vision presented to the reader is that the Barolong have failed to perceive the potential threat posed by the Boers. The only Black character who is able to pierce through the veil of deception and the illusion of alliance is the omniscient Mhudi. The novel charts Mhudi's initial uneasiness and intuition that the Boers might turn out to be more brutal oppressors than the Matabele. Her observations begin with trivial Boer cruelties towards their Hottentot servants. The first incident of Boer ruthlessness which horrifies Mhudi is the

episode in which an old Boer woman hits a Hottentot girl servant with a hot poker:

> My husband's friends! They looked at the girl squirming with pains, with her ear between two irons and they peacefully smoked their pipes like a crowd of people watching a dance. *Give me a Matabele rather. He, at any rate, will spear you to death and put an end to your pains.* (p.117).

The refrain, '"My husband's friends!"', is a deliberate rehearsal designed to evoke and to ritualize the naivete of Ra-Thaga, who symbolizes the Barolong ruling elite. At a more sublime level, Mhudi represents the native wit which, the novel intimates, appears to be undermined by the traditional martially-oriented culture and the jostling for absolute power. The Matabele-Boer dichotomy and Mhudi's aversion to Boer brutality and her preference for Matabele savagery endorses the comment the novel makes, subtly, that the native wit of the Barolong has been dissipated or blunted by the warrior-oriented and tyrannical traditions they had been subjected to. This perception accounts for Ra-Thaga's complacent attitude to the brutalization meted out by the Boers on their Hottentot servants. This brutal assault on the girl confirms Mhudi's initial intuition. Now convinced of her instinctive dislike for the Boers, Mhudi unequivocally declares to Ra-Thaga that the Matabele are more humane than the Boers. The reader is told that the incident shatters Mhudi's growing friendliness with the Boers (pp.116-117). Plaatje highlights the different reactions of Mhudi and Ra-Thaga to this cruelty. The narrator sets about subtly to deflate the puritanical superior airs of 'the Boers, a race of proverbial Bible readers, who profess Christianity to the point of bigotry ...' (p.184). But the creative ploy being manipulated here by the text is a two-edged stylistic dagger which cuts both the Boers and Barolong, symbolized by Ra-Thaga - an anti-imperialist-cum-anti-traditional

African drive which permeates the five novels selected for this study. This Janus-faced stylistic weaponry is devastatingly manipulated by Ouologuem and Armah in their assault on indigenous tyrants and despotic alien invaders and conquerors.

Plaatje alerts the reader's attention to Ra-Thaga's concealment of the Boers' dehumanization of their Hottentot servants from Mhudi:

> Now Ra-Thaga during his numerous visits to the Hoek had seen several instances of severe flogging of Hottentots, but ... he minded his own business and overlooked these instances. But since his wife had made her caustic observations he could not help remarking that, compared with the larger population in the Barolong town, the rate of flogging among the small population at the Hoek was disproportionately high. Besides this he remarked that the Boers inflicted corporal punishment by using the birch upon their own children very much like the Barolong; ... He noticed further that no Boer ever interceded when a Hottentot was flogged; that in punishing Hottentots the Boers used dangerous weapons, the most familiar being the sjambok made of sea-cow hide, or the buckle end of a belt. (pp.117-118)

Ra-Thaga's reluctance to tell Mhudi about the several instances of brutal flogging he has witnessed meted out on Hottentot servants by the Boers can be interpreted in different ways. It could either suggest that Ra-Thaga accepts the servile role imposed upon Blacks by the Boers or that he thinks that what the Boers do to their servants is none of his concern. There is an intimation that Ra-Thaga has failed to grasp the full implication of the Boer-Black conflict. This is an oblique indictment of Barolong failure to comprehend the reality of their situation. The novel suggests that Ra-Thaga and the Tswana, who are currently perceived as allies, will be treated just like the Hottentot servants in fulfilment of Mzilikazi's prophecy which closes the novel. Ra-Thaga's most unnerving experience with the

new settlers is the incident in which he almost gets thrashed for daring to drink water from a Boer vessel. Though this event emerges as the climax of Ra-Thaga's slow and dimly perceived awakening to self-awareness, his agreement with de Villiers to conceal the incident from Mhudi confirms the view that Ra-Thaga accepts the servility imposed on Blacks by the Boers. According to de Villiers, if Ra-Thaga 'were not a Morolong he would have paid for his presumptuous action with a lacerated back' (p.118). Later Ra-Thaga learns from de Villiers that Boers do not allow any Black to drink or eat from their vessels or plates and that the vessels and plates used in Boer houses for serving Ra-Thaga are reserved for use by the Hottentot servants and other Black visitors. After this revelation, Ra-Thaga's visits to de Villiers' home become less frequent. Ra-Thaga's reaction to this petty discrimination is one of impotent resignation.

The last episode of the brutalization of Black servants by Boers which Mhudi witnesses occurs during her search for her husband in the battle between the Boer-Barolong allies and the Matabele. She is horrified by a vicious scene in which the Boers flog a Black servant, Dancer, unconscious (p.162). The series of domestic incidents of Boer cruelties inflicted upon their Hottentot servants are a harbinger of the future maltreatment and oppression of the Bantu peoples of Southern Africa by the Boers.

The question which nags the reader is Plaatje's creative purpose in this detailed portrayal of Boer brutality towards Blacks and of Ra-Thaga's timid resignation to and acceptance of this state of affairs. It is reiterated that the novel indicts the Barolong ruling elite for lack of vision - vision which should have enabled them to foresee the possibility of their allies depriving them of their land. Plaatje deals directly with this Boer

betrayal in his *Native Life in South Africa* but opts for an ambiguous treatment in his creative work. There is the sustained suggestion that the Barolong and the other Bechuana tribes who join the Boers against the Matabele, quite convinced that they will regain their lands, cattle and the right to rule themselves as they did before the *difaqane*, are doomed to a huge disenchantment. Although the hidden agenda of the Boers are exposed during the debate on the division of spoils in the event of victory over the Matabele, the Barolong, being blinded by their ethnic hatred for the Matabele, fail to grasp the deeper import of the alliance. The Boer trek leader, Hendrik Potgieter, and his men try to impose upon the Barolong an agreement which the Boers describe as 'a just' bargain. This 'just' agreement entails the Boers keeping all the captured land for themselves and giving the Barolong only the cattle. But Tauana, whose cattle and land had been captured by the Matabele, contemptuously rejects the 'just' bargain:

> What an absurd bargain! ... what could one do with a number of cattle if he possessed no land on which to feed them? Will his cattle run on the clouds! and the grass grow in the air? No, my lords; I would rather leave the Matabele where they are and remain a sojourner with my people in the land of the Selekas under my cousin, Moroka. (p.142)

Chief Tauana, the victim of the Matabele military action, is prepared to join the alliance against Mzilikazi only on one condition: 'If we succeed to dislodge Mzilikazi. I want the land of my fathers back. The Boers could keep all the land to the east, but I want the whole of the Molopo River and its tributaries.' Chief Tauana's preconditions for joining the alliance are further endorsed by Chief Moroka, who declares that 'On Tauana's terms ... I too am prepared to help with the further condition that, *while you share the lands at present occupied by the Matabele, I remain at Thaba Nchu and continue in possession*

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of my present territories' (p.142, my emphasis). That the Barolong conditions are accepted by the Boers only 'after much wrangling and arguing' portend the ultimate negation of the terms of the agreement. Plaatje intimates that there is enough evidence to suggest that the Boers would break their word and keep all the land for themselves once Mzilikazi and the Matabele were defeated. Perhaps the most overt indictment of Ra-Thaga's naivete - and by projection that of the ruling Barolong elite - are two closing remarks and an incident in which Ra-Thaga declares to de Villiers: "Who would have thought ... when you and I plotted and schemed against Mzilikazi, that he would be routed within a year?" (p.184). The second remark is made by Ra-Thaga to Mhudi as the couple is travelling in their ox-wagon home: "I have had my revenge and ought to be satisfied ...' (p.188) The last evidence is the polite request by de Villiers and his wife to Mhudi and Ra-Thaga to stay with them and not go back to live with their own people in Thaba Nchu (p.183). Closing the novel with these comments suggests that Plaatje is drawing the reader's attention to the rehearsal of views already made in the text. The fulfilment of the destruction of Mzilikazi's power which Ra-Thaga proudly alludes to is also a harbinger of his own future brutalization by his current allies. The reader also knows that the 'revenge' Ra-Thaga talks about re-enacts the revengeful Matabele destruction of Kunana in retaliation for Chief Tauana's killing of Mzilikazi's tax men. Now the Barolong have had their revenge and we know, just like Plaatje knew, that the revenge Ra-Thaga refers to is a hollow one, for subsequently the Barolong lose all their land and freedom to the Boers. Then comes the coda which indicts Ra-Thaga for his naivete. It is in the form of an invitation by the de Villiers to Ra-Thaga and Mhudi to break away from the Barolong people and live permanently with them:

> De Villiers vainly tried to persuade Ra-Thaga to break with his people and remain with him. Hannetjie too had fallen in love with Mhudi. She said if she lived to have little ones of her own, surely they would be proud to have for an ayah such a noble mosadi as Mhudi. But, unlike the two men, they knew not each other's language, consequently she made a less favourable impression on Mhudi than de Villiers did on her husband. (pp.183-184)

Though the text deliberately avoids shaping the reader's construct of the hidden import of this magnanimous gesture of friendship, the intended meaning is obvious. The invitation is a masked request for Ra-Thaga and Mhudi to become the permanent servants of the de Villiers family. Gerald Moore endorses this interpretation when he asserts that 'It is also abundantly clear that if Mhudi and Ra-Thaga were to stay with de Villiers and his young bride, as they are repeatedly urged to do, they would do so as servants, not as friends' (1980:249).

In his *Native Life in South Africa* (1916:126-131) Plaatje reveals that as soon as Chief Moroka died and his sons began to fight among themselves, the Boers of the Orange Free State seized the opportunity by joining the rebel Prince Samuel against his brother, the reigning Chief Tsipinare, whom Samuel and his Boer allies murdered in 1884. President Brand then 'annexed Thaba Nchu to the 'Free' State, and banished the rival chief from 'Free' State territory, with all his followers'. Plaatje's trenchant comment - 'But the story of relations between the Boers and the Barolong needs no comments: it is consistent with the general policy of the Boers, which, as far as natives are concerned, draws no distinction between friend and foe' (1916:126) - amounts to a fateful fulfilment of Mzilikazi's prophecy of the Boers' eventual appropriation of Barolong territory. Mhudi's suspicions about the Boers are fully vindicated. We are told that after the defeat of the Matabele '... *some of the young herders were taken*

captive and permanently retained by the Boers as slaves. Those who resisted or tried to run away were shot' (p.142). The reduction of captured Matabele herdboys to slaves and the killing of those who try to run away are precursors of the heinous and oppressive system that would in the future be imposed upon the Blacks of Southern Africa by the Boer republics.

Plaatje's reconstruction of the *difaqane* contends that the pre-*difaqane* paradise is destroyed by Mzilikazi. The novel extends the pre-*difaqane* destruction of peace by Mzilikazi to the new and horrifying destruction symbolized by the firearms introduced by the Boers. Gun warfare and its unprecedented din is unleashed upon the sub-continent by the Boers. The novel castigates the Boers for the destruction of peace - a monstrous annihilation of the serenity of the human as well as the animal world:

> The new moon, expected to make all things new, had instead brought an appalling revolution, for blood and terror had taken the place of peace of yesterday. The stillness of the woods which had enjoyed peace and tranquillity for a thousand of years was suddenly broken by a new and hitherto unknown din of war. (p.147).

There is a definite indication that in spite of Mzilikazi's earlier wars, in which the Matabele warriors destroyed the Barolong and their capital, Kunana, there had remained a reasonable measure of peace and a congenial environment to sustain man and beast. It is this peaceful and nurturing environment which is shattered by the Boers through their introduction of gun warfare:

> The forests shook with the awful thunder of the guns... Terrified game of every description scattered in all directions and fled for their dear life; oxen bellowed in surprise and wild hounds yelped, wolves and jackals ran as though possessed by a legion of devils. Wild birds rushed out of their nests and protested loudly against this unholy disturbance of the peace of their haunts. (p.147)

The monstrous effect of the destructiveness of the gun and its din and disorientation of man and wildlife, dwarf the carnage of Mzilikazi's military operations and the devastation wrought by the short-handled and broad-bladed assegai. *Mhudi* contends that although the Matabele were pests, the abhorrent abuse of power which has plagued Black Southern Africans for decades is ushered in by the Boers, and not by the Zulus and the Matabele. Oblivious to what is in store for them, the Black allies glorify the victorious Boers as protectors of the weak and as great heroes who have saved them from Matabele oppression. The narrator tells us that '... *many were the praises sung in honour of the Boers*' (p.148, my emphasis).

The novel's reconstruction of South African history, particularly its re-interpretation of the Wars of Calamity, is given new depth and mythical dimension by Plaatje's ingenious deployment of prophecies and Halley's Comet.

The initial manipulation of prophecies can be traced to the killing of Mzilikazi's tax-collectors, Bangela and Bhoya, by Chief Tauana. Before his death Bhoya utters a prophecy of the demolition of Kunana:

> You will pay with your own blood and the blood of your children for laying your base hands on the courier of King Mzilikazi... A Matabele's blood never mingled with the earth without portending death and destruction. (pp.29-30)

This prediction is fulfilled when Langa and his impis raze Kunana to the ground and capture Barolong cattle. Similarly when the Matabele celebrate their victory over the Barolong amidst praises, Gubuza also issues a dire prophecy of retribution, and warns that 'I'm convinced that the owners of so many cattle will never rest until they recover them' (p.57). The series of prophecies which permeate this work have reinforced the thesis

that there is always a day of retribution for those who destroy the human, the cosmic and the divine order of the universe. And for Mzilikazi that day comes when the Matabele are defeated, their warriors and the cream of their nobility wiped off the surface of the earth, and their cattle and their kingdom captured by the Barolong-Griqua-Boer armies.

The cycle of prophecy and retribution does not close with the Matabele defeat. The patterning of predictions is compounded by Mzilikazi's own prophecy of the horrendous destiny awaiting the Barolong, the Bechuana tribes and the Griquas who join the Boers against the Matabele:

> Those bearded Boers who killed my herdboys and stole my cattle are today helping them to destroy me... They [the Boers] will despoil them of the very lands they have rendered unsafe for us, they will entice the Bechuana youths to war and the chase, only to use them as pack-oxen; yes, they will refuse to share with them the spoils of victory .... They will turn Bechuana women into beasts of burden to drag their loaded wagons to their granaries... they shall take Bechuana women to wife and, with them breed a race of half man and half goblins... *then shall come our turn to laugh.*(pp.174-175, my emphasis).

Although Mzilikazi might have rejoiced when the Barolong and the Bechuana tribes were dispossessed of their land by the Boers, his joy is short-lived, for his new kingdom in Zimbabwe is also conquered by Cecil Rhodes. His final destiny, as symbolized by his son, Lobengula, is not different from that of the Barolong and Bechuana tribes. Mzilikazi's prediction that the Boers would forget the help offered them by the Barolong and treat their allies just as they have treated their servants and their enemies, is fulfilled.

Plaatje's imaginative handling of Halley's Comet in order to effect his historical reconstruction merits detailed scrutiny.

The author links the imagery of the comet with African occult practices and mystical divination by 'magicians' and 'wizards'. The Matabele 'principal national wizard' (p.136) throws his bones and foretells the impending doom of the Matabele and the Black kingdoms of Southern Africa :

> Away in the distance I can see a mighty star in the skies a long white tail stretching almost across the heavens. Wise men have always said that such a star is the harbinger of diseases of men and beasts, wars and the overthrow of governments as well as the death of princes. Within the rays of the tail of this star, I can clearly see streams of tears and rivers of blood... I can see the mighty throne of Mzilikazi floating across the crimson stream, and reaching a safe landing on the opposite bank. I also perceive clear indications of death and destruction among rulers and commoners... There will be wars in Zululand, fighting in Basutoland, a stream of blood across the world.
>
> (p.137)

Tim Couzens' article 'Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*' (1973:17) asserts: 'That the effect of Halley's comet was widespread and persistent and was interpreted as presaging the end of the white man is confirmed by events in 1921.' But Couzens's claim that Halley's Comet is used by Black writers to symbolize the demise of white rule in Southern Africa is not supported by the textual evidence in the novel. A casual analysis of the text supports the view that Plaatje uses the comet as a symbol of Boer destruction of traditional African independence (p.137). This view is substantiated by Plaatje's ingenious linkage of Halley's Comet with Mzilikazi's defeat and the death of the Zulu King, Dingaan. One of the Matabele warriors tells us that 'I overheard today the Great One telling Sombebe that Dingaan, King of all the Zulus, was no more; and if great trees like those crumble down over their own roots, what must become of shallow sprouts like the Matabele...?' (p.149). It is hinted that the cause of Dingaan's death is uncertain, but several possibilities are suggested. One

of these is the allegation that 'he [King Dingaan] was killed by the very witches who are attacking us today'. That substantiates my thesis that Halley's Comet in *Mhudi* symbolizes the Boer destruction of the Black kingdoms. A rhetorical question posed by a Matabele warrior, shocked by the news that the Boers might be responsible for Dingaan's death - 'Impossible, ... are they then flying across the world and slaying everything in their way? ...' (p.149) - further reinforces this critical formulation. The suggestion that apart from the wily and sharp-witted King Moshoeshoe of the Basotho, all chiefs - including those of the Barolong and the Bechuana tribes - will be vanquished by the Boers, endorses my interpretation of the comet as a harbinger of the ultimate destruction of traditional African freedom and political power.

The novel's re-interpretation of the *difaqane* is also linked to the general history of Africa. Plaatje utilizes an adaptation of the stylistic technique which tethers the traditional African woman's destiny to that of Mother Africa: from microcosm to macrocosm. The destruction of the Matabele and the capture of their cattle and the famine which plagues the kingdom which was once the land of plenty is epitomized by the plight of starving nursing mothers whose breasts have become dry and their starving babies and children:

> He [Mzilikazi] heard the bitter wail of the children who hungrily shrieked aloud for food. He saw anxious mothers pressing their empty breasts into the mouths of crying babies, but the teats of starving mothers failed to still the gnawing pangs of hunger and the little ones kept up their weak discordant wail. (p.172)

That the demise of the Matabele kingdom is represented by the suffering and the starvation of the women and their suckling infants affirms the view that the novel projects the plight of

the African traditional women as a miniaturized version of Mother Africa's endless cycles of suffering. Plaatje's portrayal of Umnandi further validates this view.

The fate of Umnandi, the Matabele model queen afflicted with barrenness, evokes the destiny of Araba Jesiwa in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Healers* (1979). Plaatje's manipulation of the theme of infertility evokes sensations normally generated by the West African oral motif called *ogbanje* (Igbo) or *dzikuidzikui* (Ewe). Chinua Achebe defines an *ogbanje/dzikuidzikui* in *Things Fall Apart* as 'one of those wicked children who, when they died, entered their mothers' wombs to be born again' (1958:54). The meaning of the same phenomenon is laid bare by the linguistic patterning of two words which are compounded to form *dzikuidzikui*. In Ewe, *dzi* means to be born, and *ku(i)* means to be dead. Through a process of coupling, we have *dzikuidzikui* which literally means 'born-dead-born-dead'. Umnandi goes through a futile cyclic pattern of countless curative treatments in order to become pregnant. Her endless submissions to all the worthless treatments from all kinds of healers are similar to the sufferings of a woman tormented by *dzikuidzikui*. This critique hypothesizes that Umnandi's rites of passage re-enact the hopelessness of Africa's futile historical attempts to create powerful and viable nations to ward off foreign domination while at the same time freeing herself from centuries of indigenous tyrannies. This critical perception is evoked by the novel's linkage of Umnandi's destiny with that of the Matabele kingdom. The rapid growth of Mzilikazi's empire and his dreams of '... establishing an empire from the northern extremity of Bechuanaland to the sea coast of Monomotapa, embracing the Tonga, Swazi and Zululand kingdoms and extending with the sea shore as its boundary right away to the Pondoland coast' (p.170) are

'shattered and blown away like so many autumn leaves at the mercy of a violent hurricane' (p.171). To project Umnandi as a symbol of Mother Africa, the text links the destruction of Matabeleland and the general doom of African kingdoms, epitomized by Halley's Comet, with her disappearance. The model Queen whose dreams of procreating princes to rule Matabeleland are not only shattered, like Mzilikazi's imperial dreams, but are also perceived as a series of nightmares and a metaphysical death, is forced to a life of exile. Her agonizing ordeal foreshadows the military defeat and the final destruction of Mzilikazi's kingdom by the Boers and their allies. This interpretation is attested by Mzilikazi's own declaration:

> My greatness grew with the renown of her beauty, her wisdom and her stately reception of my guests. She vanished and, with her the magic talisman of my court. (p.172).

It is thus apparent that Umnandi's countless attempts to get pregnant and to give birth to sons who will extend Mzilikazi's lineage and perpetuate his kingdom re-enact Africa's futile and endless centuries of countless attempts to break its chain of tyrannies:

> She [Umnandi] took counsel with famous herbalists from Basutoland, Swaziland, Bechuanaland and Pediland; she went through painful and disgusting ordeals on their advice; just for the hope of becoming a mother; but these wizards accomplished nothing beyond filling her heart with a succession of hopes, each of which in turn proved worthless.
>
> (pp.92-93)

The worthless treatments Umnandi has subjected herself to in order to become pregnant can be interpreted in different ways. There is the temptation to interpret it as the novel's disfigurement of traditional healing, but the same traditional curative measures work for Mhudi and Umnandi later. The most overt implication, therefore, is that Umnandi's agonized ordeals

of childlessness can also be likened to Mother Africa's own endless attempts to thwart tyrannies imposed by her own sons and by foreign domination as well as her failures to achieve peace and freedom. But although the Umnandi-Mzilikazi reunion, the building of a new empire in Zimbabwe and Umnandi's final birth of a son who rules after Mzilikazi, suggest a better future for Mother Africa, the fact that Mzilikazi's Zimbabwe kingdom meets a similar fate when it is destroyed by Cecil Rhodes reveals the novel's projected historical view of Africa as doomed to a cyclic pattern of destruction.

Chief Tauana's murder of Mzilikazi's tax-collectors and the retribution he and his people have to pay for this; the horrendous Matabele defeat in which the cream of their nobility and Prince Langa (the architect of the Barolong demolition) are wiped out; the eventual reduction of the Barolong and Bechuana tribes to servile subjects by their former allies; and the second and final destruction of Mzilikazi's Zimbabwe empire by Cecil Rhodes - all these underpin Plaatje's fictional reconstruction of Southern African history. Plaatje's historical vision of Africa suggests that 'the dark continent' is doomed to an endless cycle of repeated tyrannies imposed either by her own rulers or by foreign rulers. Both Mhudi and Umnandi can also be seen as embodiments of Plaatje's ideals of African womanhood and Mother Africa, struggling to get free from the ravages and deprivations of traditional African male chauvinism, ethnic wars, local and foreign tyrannies.

Although Plaatje's creative aim is obviously to reinterpret the *difaqane* from the perspective of the victims and to indict the perpetrators of the ethnic wars of carnage, his overall reconstruction is more objective than that of Thomas Mofolo in

Chaka. In *Mhudi,* all the participants in the Wars of Calamity share responsibility for the destruction and demonic misery wrought by the *difaqane* and suffer varying degrees of retribution for their destructive roles. The demolition of Matabeleland is presented as a fitting punishment for the devastating wars of carnage inflicted on the region by Mzilikazi and his Matabele warriors. But even the victims of the *difaqane* are not spared. The Barolong, the Bechuana and the Griquas, the victims of Matabele oppression, also pay a cruel price for naively allying themselves with the Boers. Instead of the more containable Matabele oppression, the Barolong and the Bechuana tribes ironically initiate their own ruthless subjugation by the Boers, by replacing the Matabele overlordship (which at least permits the conquered tribes to rule themselves) with a heinous and tyrannical system which dispossess the former allies of their land and reduces the landless to farm-hands doomed to virtual slavery.

NOTES

1. The *difaqane* (Sotho) or the *mfecane* (Nguni) is defined by G.M. Dalgish's *A Dictionary of Africanisms* as 'a period of strife, displacement and migrations of black Africans from areas near Natal and Swaziland to central and southern Africa in the eighteenth century, during the reign of Chaka [Shaka]' (1982:44).

2. Mzilikazi was 'the chief of the Khumalo and one of Shaka's most trusted generals' (J.D. Omer-Cooper, 1966:37; 129-153). He broke away from Shaka in 1821 and set up his own Matabele empire in northern Transvaal. Mzilikazi is portrayed in Sotho myths as the 'butcher of children and women'. He was finally defeated by Boer-Barolong alliance and driven into Zimbabwe where he founded a new empire. He died in 1868. His son and heir, King Lobengula, was finally defeated in 1893 by the British who were led by Cecil Rhodes. King Lobengula died a refugee in 1896, after his empire was taken over by the British.

Chapter 4

A World Trapped in an Orgy of Violence, Barbarism and Servitude: Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*

> Olofi created the earth and all the things in it. He created beautiful things and ugly things. He created Truth and he created Falsehood. He made Truth big and powerful, but he made Falsehood skinny and weak. And he made them enemies. He gave falsehood a cutlass, unbeknownst to Truth. One day, the two met and started fighting. Truth, being so big and powerful felt confident, and also very complacent since he didn't know that Falsehood had a cutlass. So Falsehood cunningly cut off Truth's head. This jolted and enraged Truth and he started scrambling around for his head. He stumbled on Falsehood and, knocking him down, Truth felt the head of Falsehood which he took to be his own. His strength being truly awesome, a mere pull from Truth yanked off the head of Falsehood and this Truth placed on his own neck. And from that day what we have had is this grotesque and confusing mismatch: the body of Truth; the head of Falsehood.
>
> An Afro-Cuban Myth[1]

The aim of this analysis is to assess the hypothesis that Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*, which was first published in French as *Le Devoir de Violence* (1968), deflates Africa's image and the African Golden Age. It is postulated that *Bound to Violence*, in its subversive literary onslaught against traditional Africa and all that it stands for, hurls a brazen sneer at the works of the Black master historians (C. A. Diop, Chancellor Williams, Walter Rodney, and others) and at all Black negritude writers, who have, meticulously, created a romanticized counter-image of Africa. This study argues that, in order to transform into fictional realism his vision of Africa's chronic servitude and tyranny, Ouologuem recreates and re-orders Africa's history, heritage and oral traditions, projecting an Africa that is trapped in an endless orgy of sex, demonic cruelty, barbarism, cannibalism, slavery, and violence. The author achieves his aim,

the study will show, by arguing that politics subsists on violence and exploitation, and that every fabric of humanity in the society portrayed in *Bound to Violence* is caught in a perpetual vortex of all facets of man's debased nature, which is ideologically fuelled by a ruling elite, propelled by its voracity for absolute and eternal power.

Bound to Violence is structured around the African legendary epic tradition. Like Armah in *Two Thousand Seasons*, Ouologuem engages in an innovative manipulation of the epic genre by designing an experimental style which is a blend of different narrative patterns. The main components of Ouologuem's ingenious multifarious style are *the oral epic tradition* (the *mythos*), the *didactic* and the *historical* - a sub-category of the *empirical*. Scholes et al define the core of the traditional epic story (*mythos*) in their *The Nature of Narrative* (1966) as follows:

> The primary impulse which moves him is not a historical one, nor a creative one; it is *re*-creative. He is retelling a traditional story, and therefore his primary allegiance is not to fact, not to truth, not to entertainment, but to the *mythos* itself - the story as preserved in the tradition which the epic story-teller is re-creating. The word *mythos* meant precisely this in ancient Greece: *a traditional story*.
>
> (Scholes and Kellogg, 1966:12)

To transcend the sacrosanct limited confines imposed upon the griot by the traditional oral epic genre, Ouologuem adopts, as a part of his stylistic experimentation, a narrative mode which Scholes and Kellogg label 'the *empirical*' impulse of 'the epic synthesis' - a stylistic strategy which is normally employed to avoid 'the tyranny of the traditional in story-telling' (1966:12). Though the empirical narrative mode employed by *Bound to Violence* is contrary to that of the *fictional* narrative pattern of the epic story-teller, whose concern 'is telling a traditional story', it is argued that Ouologuem's creative purpose demands his deployment of the two 'antithetical types of narrative' (Scholes and Kellogg, 1966:13). His use of the two opposing modes of style is determined by his status as a neo-traditional[2] artist. On the one hand, Ouologuem is compelled to

use the oral epic stylistic medium and the inherited oral sources which were created and are being recreated through the ages (from pre-colonial to postcolonial Africa) by the ancient hereditary caste of griots, added to and coloured by the conflicting versions of nativist elders and literate Islamized chroniclers, who were guided by Arab imperialist ideology. On the other hand, to achieve his didactic aim, which is shaped by his postcolonial vision of Africa, the author uses the *empirical mode* which allows him to break the authoritative boundaries enshrined by 'the God-given traditions' of the epic genre. This study will suggest that, since Ouologuem is guided by his own creative vision of Africa, his final project, which is neither purely traditional nor purely postcolonial, is, therefore, a subjective syncretized tale of Nakem. *Bound to Violence* is neo-traditional because it incorporates the three Africas: pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial. The historical mode which is employed by the text is also defined by Scholes and Kellogg as follows:

> The historical component owes its allegiance specifically to truth of fact and to the actual past rather than to a traditional version of the past. It requires for its development means of accurate measurement in time and space, and concepts of causality referable to human and natural rather than to supernatural agencies.
>
> (Scholes and Kellogg, 1966:13)

This definition of the historical narrative demystifies the novel's constant reference to dates, places, "historical" figures, and self-reflexive rationalizations of causes of events - a simulated creative ploy designed to evoke the novel's historicity. The historical mode also enables Ouologuem to deploy ironic modes and tropes in deflating the false legendary and pseudo-magico-spiritual image, meticulously crafted by the Saifs to enhance their fabricated royal status. The other element of the novel's synthesized style is the didactic - a stylistic impulse that strives for the truth at the expense of creative aesthetics or beauty. It would, however, be a misreading of the text to intimate that *Bound to Violence* is devoid of beauty; yet although the novel overtly evokes beauty, its major concern is polemical: to drive home the message of the pervasiveness of violence.

Another facet of Ouologuem's complex style, which is manipulated to effect the novel's denigration of the image of Africa, is his parodic adaptation of the African oral epic tradition, particularly the Sunjata type of epic, heavily laced with Islamic pseudo-spirituality. The author parodies and criticizes the African oral arts and in particular the legendary epic tradition in such a way that the oral traditions and the epic genre are presented as being tainted by the depraved ruling caste and their ideological mouthpieces, the traditional griots. Thus the tyrannical and corrupt Saif dynasty, as representative of Africa's ruling elites (pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial), overpowered by its perpetual obsession with the acquisition of supreme political power, converts all elements of the society into instruments for absolute control. Against this paradigm, *Bound to Violence* presents the Saifs, the Euro-Arab colonizers and contemporary African political leaders, as immoral pollutants who are engaged in the perpetual transformation of the oral traditions into various forms of political and economic gain - a degeneration which undermines the authenticity of the African oral arts as a whole. One of the major concerns of this study, therefore, is to investigate how the text has effected this adulteration of African oral traditions, particularly the oral epic modes and tropes.

This investigation also submits that *Bound to Violence*'s intertextual process of coming into being as a novel constitutes another brilliant commentary on the text's vision of violence as a huge parasitic germ of *destruction* and *perverted re-creation*. There appears to be, the study will argue, a weird paradox at play in the very creation of this novel. This abstruseness projects the text as a voracious literary leech which contaminates itself and other creative systems in order to enrich itself and other literary cultures by incorporating alien texts and versions of African history and ethnology into its textual body. Such a parasitic evolution of the literary text appears to be the novel's uncanny mirror-image of the growth of Africa's civilization and that of the world. *Bound to Violence* conveys

this message by interrogating itself; demystifying how it is crafted; self-consciously drawing attention to the multiplicity of its chaotic sources; subverting its own internal reliability and realism by juxtaposing conflicting oral historical versions of the Nakem Empire; and contesting the authenticity of the oral traditions and other versions of the empire's history - the ideologically tainted sources which constitute the novel's syncretised textual matrix. This inter-textual-subversion is similar to the metafictional technique of the self-conscious novel which sabotages its own process of coming into being as text. Doing violence to itself becomes the novel's most powerful re-enactment of its integral preoccupation: the all-consuming feature of political violence and exploitation which characterizes Africa's historical rites of passage.

This critique contends that *Bound to Violence* assays to change our vision of the ruler-ruled relationship by assaulting our senses of reality and our habitual naive attitudes to the corrosive and strangulating effects of political violence and manipulation. The text sets out to accomplish this task by projecting a thesis which argues that the ruling elite of Nakem-Ziuko and, in general, the rulers of Africa (indigenous and alien) have, since the cradle of the world's civilization, devastatingly transformed every form of man's barbarism and fiendish cruelty into gruesome political weapons of domination and control. To transform the historical and the African epic modes which are manipulated by the novel into fictional reality, and to question the legitimacy of the African oral traditions, particularly the oral epic genre, Ouologuem juxtaposes a web of conflicting points of view which battle for supremacy in this complex and baffling novel. The outcome of the multifariousness of narrative viewpoints is the problem of identifying the authentic version from the chaotic mass of conflicting accounts which constitute Nakem-Ziuko's fictional history.

Bound to Violence also questions Black writers' eternal preoccupation with the search for literary strategies for the

retrieval of pristine African values. The opening epigram, cited from an Afro-Cuban myth which rationalizes the mystified relationship between truth and falsehood, echoes the enigmatic and the paradoxical truth-falsehood impasse uncannily projected by Ouologuem's novel. The novel's self-reflexivity invites the reader to put together the pieces of this literary jig-saw puzzle - to work out which of the versions projects the truth: the traditional griots', the nativist elders', the literate Islamized chroniclers' or the neo-traditional griot, Mahmud Meknud Trare's version. This study submits that *Bound to Violence*, the synthesized account which has been put together by the modern griot, Ouologuem/Trare, who uses various oral and written versions of Nakem's ethno-history, the traditional African epic genre, as well as postcolonial creative modes of fiction writing, is a syncretised or a synthetic version, which is coloured by his own ideological bias and artistic vision. Thus, although Ouologuem's/Trare's version is mantled in African oral epic traditionalism, it is not a pure traditional project. It is, rather, a subjective amalgam of Nakem-Ziuko's entire course of history: the pre-colonial, the colonial and the postcolonial. Clearly, Mahmud Meknud Trare, the postcolonial griot who purportedly compiles this written account, is, therefore, the surrogate author of *Bound to Violence*.

The research will also examine how the novel, like the works of Mofolo, Plaatje and Armah included in this study, intensifies its repudiation of the debauched and corrupt world of the Saifs, colonizers and contemporary African leaders by condemning their reduction of women to sexual objects, beasts of burden and dehumanized pawns in the deadly game of power. Finally, the critical pronouncements which are generated by Ouologuem's selective use of African history and heritage will be analyzed. *Bound to Violence*, it must be pointed out, defies lineal textual examination because its labyrinthine narrative structure is superbly crafted to generate eclectic insights.

Bound To Violence has generated three main critical viewpoints. The first is the Eurocentric view which perceives the work as a masterpiece - an overwhelming acclamation that is regarded with suspicion by African critics who contend that the Euro-American complimentary reviews are generated by racially-motivated criticism which considers the text's vilification of African values as the primary evidence of its literary quality. Diametrically opposed to the Eurocentric critical compliments is the first African critical formulation that sees the novel's presentation of Africa as a devastating denigration of the continent's collective image and as a demolition of Africa's Golden Age. This view is endorsed by an Afrocentric American critic, Thomas A. Hale (1984). And lastly, there is a growing African counter-discourse which challenges not only the first African critical formulation condemning *Bound to Violence* but also the flattering Eurocentric views arguing that though the novel distorts African history and reality, its thrust is directed against the ruling classes of the world, and not specifically against Africa. The novel, this investigation argues, provides enough evidence to substantiate both African viewpoints. That is, it repudiates not only the historical and the cultural rites of passage of Africa but it also castigates the world's ruling elites for their corruption and exploitation of the people.

The overwhelming Euro-American acclamation of *Bound to Violence* on its first appearance in print is summed up in Eric Sellin's 'The Unknown Voice of Yambo Ouologuem'. Sellin, who achieved literary fame[3] by becoming the chief advocate in amassing evidence against Ouologuem when it was later discovered that the author had liberally incorporated other texts into the textuality of his work, asserts that 'two articles[4] in *Le Monde* are representative of the critical reaction which greeted this first novel, especially in Europe and America'. Sellin contends that 'The [European] reviews stress Ouologuem's unique and independent imagination and authenticity of his role as a mouthpiece for the African ontology' (Sellin, 1976:139).

Opposed to the complimentary opinion of *Bound to Violence* is the predominant African view which contends that Ouologuem has given the Eurocentric critics, who are racially-oriented, literary ammunition for further disparagement of Africa's image. A.E. Ohaegbu's 'An Approach to Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de Violence*' confirms this African suspicion when he highlights the reactions of Eurocentric racist-motivated complimentary criticism of the text. Ohaegbu declares that 'some racially minded literary critics and reviewers of Europe and America easily succumbed to the temptation of regarding it [the novel] as the greatest blow that has ever been dealt to African life, tradition, and values by an African writer' (1979:124). Hurbert de Leusse (1971)[5], Ohaegbu argues, fits into this mould. Ohaegbu contends that de Leusse's reading of the text suggests that Ouologuem's intention is to debunk a '"certain fictitious and idyllic image of Africa" presented by African writers and ethnologists'. Ohaegbu concludes that 'Considering the wave of violence which runs across the entire novel, this critic [de Leusse] comes to the conclusion that "Africa is in reality a land where violence is equalled only by the dread it called forth ..."' (cited in Ohaegbu, 1979:124). Another Eurocentric critic whose complimentary review is evoked by the novel's pervasive denigration of Africa's image is Yves Benot (1970). In his article[6] Benot declares that the novel's acclamation stems from its subversion of the African image. The French critic asserts that Ouologuem is a 'non-conformist' African writer who discounts the perception that Africa had been conquered and brutalized by colonization and adds that, to the French readership, 'this is a consoling and comforting book' (Benot, 1970:128, cited in Ohaegbu, 1979:124). The novel's Eurocentric review is reaffirmed by Yusufu Maiangwa's 'The Duty of Violence in Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*', which asserts that the work 'was highly praised in Europe and America'. Maiangwa concludes that 'Ouologuem was hailed by non-Africans as the first African intellectual of international standing since Senghor' (1979:73).

That some of the positive Eurocentric reviews of *Bound to Violence* emanate from the text's successful assault on the African image appear to validate not only Africa's mixed reception of the book but also my own hypothesis. The most outspoken dismissal of the novel comes from a Zairian critic, Mbelolo ya Mpiku. In his 'From one Mystification to Another: Negritude and Negraille in *Le Devoir de Violence*' (1972), Mpiku rejects the novel's 'sure-fire formula of sex and violence':

> Ouologuem's vision stands in contradiction with the African Reality ... no African critic who loves his people and is proud of them can agree with Ouologuem's view that the Black man's predicament today is the result of an ontological flaw, an innate collective proclivity to slavery and spoliation, or an inveterate inability to work out adequate solutions for his own problems.
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> (Mpiku, 1972:142)

Though Kofi Awoonor's construct of the text is slightly different from Mpiku's, his critical formulation also re-enacts the view that the novel distorts the African reality and vilifies Africa's image. In his Ph.D. dissertation entitled *A Study of the Influences of Oral Literature on the Contemporary* (1972), Awoonor locates Ouologuem's work within the anti-nostalgia literary trend in African literature. He highlights the African novel's movement from 'the era of celebration, epitomized by Achebe's work [*Things Fall Apart*], to the period of melancholic resignation and demonic anger' (1972:234):

> Yambo Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de Violence (Bound to Violence)*, attempts to debunk the *golden age idea* of earlier negritudist poetry, and plays the *advocatus diaboli* for a jaded viewpoint that seems to assign a frightening barbarism and cruelty to the African psyche. Ouologuem recreates the so-called great epical history of the African Kingdoms of the Middle Ages, debauched and corrupt, slavery ridden, harsh and cruel. The book takes us through an indescribable orgy of violence, cannibalism, and uncontrollable barbarity ... His aim, it seems, is to deflate the latter day of the African belief that Africa was the home of Humanism and benevolence. Instead, he seems to be arguing, Africa was a barbarous land of raw instinct that precipitated her own decline and fall by proceeding gleefully with filed teeth into the Arab and European era of her history. The result is an overblown and exaggerated novel ....
>
> (Awoonor, 1972:235)

The African critics' censure of *Bound to Violence* as a gross distortion of African history and reality is endorsed by Wole Soyinka. His work, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1979), contests Ouologuem's vision of African historical and existential experience (1979:106):

> Ouologuem speaks indeed of "a black colonialism". The premise for this expression is *suspect*, and it has affected Ouologuem's concepts of the pre-colonial reality of African society. A social condition in which Semites (though black and pre-Islamic) are overlords and negro-Africans the slaves still leaves the basic curiosity about black historic reality unsatisfied.

Yusufu Maiangwa reaffirms the mixed reception accorded the novel by African critics. In his article Maiangwa declares that although the book 'was highly praised in Europe and America', it 'was received with mixed feelings in Africa' (1979:73). Lodged between the African-European camps is an Afrocentric non-African commentary which endorses the African viewpoint on the novel's denigration of African values. Thomas Hale in his 'Africa and the West: Close Encounters of a Literary Kind' echoes, rather obliquely, the African view that *Bound to Violence* confirms the European misrepresentations of Africa. Hale writes:

> Students in one course who read both *Heart of Darkness, Things Fall Apart*, and *Bound to Violence* reported to me that fears about Africa raised by Conrad and dampened by Achebe were rekindled again by Ouologuem. *Bound to Violence*, is then, a significant novel in many ways, but must be approached with caution, just as, Achebe might argue, one must read Conrad with a new set of sensitivities.
>
> (Hale, 1984:269)

The above non-African critical view reaffirms the novel's overwhelming repudiation by African critics, demonstrating that not all non-African critical projects of Black texts are coloured with racist biases.

The African dismissal of the novel's denigration of Africa's image is discounted by a second African view - a counter-viewpoint which argues that the novel's target is not Africa, but the whole world. This African critical counter-view argues that Ouologuem's disservice to Africa is his manipulation of African

history and oral traditions in projecting his universal vision of the world's ruling elite and the ruled. The advocates of this critical camp are Maiangwa (1979) and Ohaegbu (1979). How Ouologuem exploits the African oral traditions in order to annihilate Africa's 'false' image and pre-colonial Golden Age by re-writing and correcting Africa's history and heritage is my immediate major concern.

The epic tale of the organised villainy of the Saif dynasty opens by locating the narrative in space and time, sketching the pervasive backdrop against which 'the bloody adventure of the niggertrash' will be writ bold in blood and tyranny, and finally, unmasking the thoroughly debauched and corrupt Saifs depicted as god-like legendary epic villains, masquerading as heroes. The text's inverted use of epic heroism is revealed in its ironical projection of the Saifs as immortals, as symbolized by Saif ben Isaac al-Heit, an epic villain *par excellence*, who looms larger than the universe. All this is given to the reader at breakneck speed:

> Our eyes drink the brightness of the sun and, overcome, marvel at the their tears. *Mashallah! wa bismillah!* ... To recount the bloody adventure of the niggertrash - shame to the worthless paupers! - there would be no need to go back beyond the present century; but the true history of the Blacks begins much earlier, with the Saifs, in the year 1202 of our era, in the African Empire of Nakem south of Fezzan, long after the conquests of Okba ben Nafi al-Fitri. (p.3)

At the very beginning of the novel we have all the major players of this holocaustic epic tale: the victims, the local devilish manipulators - the Saifs - and the earliest alien conquerors, the Arabs, armed with the Koran and the sabre. Intent on projecting the novel's historicity, which can only be conveyed through the historical medium, one of the narrative modes employed by the text, the omniscient narrator tells us that the true history of negro-Africans began long after the initial Arab conquest of the Nakem Empire. The novel evokes its historical mode by asserting that the bloody rebellion against the despotic rule of the Saifs occurred 'long after the conquests of Okba ben Nafi al-Fitri'.

And to locate the tale within its traditional oral epic matrix, the narrator, who is not yet formally identified in the novel, continues:

> What is more interesting, *when the elders, notables, and griots, peering wide-eyed into the bitters deserts, speak of that Empire,* is the desperate flight, *before God's implacable "blessing"* of its population, *baptized in torture,* hunted ... dispersed along the barren mountains of Goro Foto Zinko, strewn ... for a distance of more than fifteen hundred miles downstream from Ziuko ... scattered over the savannas ... torn by internecine rivalries and warring with one another for imperial power with a violence equalled only by the dread it called forth.
>
> By the way of reprisal the Saifs--with cries of *"For the glory of the world!"--stained their assegais in crime and tribal exactions.*
>
> (pp.3-4, my emphasis)

Ouologuem's footnoted traditional definition of the griot as 'a troubadour, *member of a hereditary caste* whose function it is *to celebrate the great events of history and uphold the God-given traditions,* (p.3, my emphasis) in the opening page of the novel is designed to authenticate the orality of the novel and to draw the reader's attention to the status of the griot and of the oral traditions created by the griots. The griots, as the definition reveals, are members of the notorious hereditary caste, headed by the tyrannical Saifs, and the oral traditions are sacrosanct. Ouologuem's traditional definition of the griot is also aimed at charming the reader into believing that the account he will be reading is an 'authentic' refashioning from a pedigree accumulated amalgam of traditional epic tales narrated by 'famous traditional griots'. The irony is that the suffering masses, from pre-colonial to postcolonial Africa, revere the oral traditions, least suspecting that they were meticulously crafted (and are still being synthesized) by the griots who were and continue to be members of Africa's ruling elites with the aim of immortalizing the tyrannical ruling caste. The novel, self-reflexively, seals the two excerpts cited above with pseudo-Islamic-spiritual codicils.

Our attention is immediately alerted to the religious tags which lace the novel: '*Mashallah! wa bismillah!*' and '*... before God's*

implacable "blessing" of its population, baptized in torture, hunted ...' This creative ploy parodies and questions the tradition of colouring the Sunjata oral epics from Francophone West Africa with absurd pseudo-pious Islamic alerts and allusions to Islamic origins of the genealogy of legendary epic heroes. The ingenious parodying of the epic genre by *Bound to Violence* adds an enigmatic dimension to the novel's subversion of African oral traditions and history, generating sublime eclecticism. The intimation that God showers his 'implacable "blessing"' on 'its' people by baptizing them in 'torture' and dispersing them all over Nakem evokes a number of ironic subtleties. At one level God is perceived as having sanctioned the demonic butchery and brutalization being meted out to the niggertrash or else He is seen as a cruel and sadistic God who is not bothered about the suffering of the masses. At a less heretical level, the moralistic alerts are intended as corrosive ridicule of the naivete of the griots, who think that flavouring their oral projects with Islamic pseudo-spirituality will maximize the grandeur of the legends and the glory of the strutting peacocks who inhabit the oral epic boundaries of their 'alien-polluted' tales. Only the reverse, however, happens. The traditional griot's ideological (non-creative) ploy, however, ironically, exposes both the non-negro-African sources of the epic legendary genre and their own defilement of the African oral arts. But the most important effect achieved by Ouologuem's unique stylistic deployment is the notion that the griots have become prostitutes who foul the African epic genre by incorporating the hollow alien Islamic ideology into it. The pervasiveness of the repudiation of all facets of African heritage is further confirmed by the rhetorical attachment: 'with cries of *"For the glory of the world!"--stained their assegais in crime and tribal exactions'*. This is a mild version of the text's parodist-ironic mode, which ridicules the insight, just made, by juxtaposing it with a previous morally-polluted act or statement. The mockery is evoked by drawing attention to the absurdity of the comment: how can the killing of the defenceless confer any glory on the world! (pp.3-4).

The novel's all-embracing parodic and ironic structure embodies, also, the de-mythification of the Islamic and Christian faiths, coupled with the Arab and European civilizations, which claim to be superior to the pre-colonial African heritage. The Islamic religious tendency to cap every statement with a religious tag is being parodied and derided as hypocritical and meaningless. This is the general purpose of the hollow religious appendages which resonate and seal almost all events in this iconoclastic narrative. The accumulative narrative effect of this technique is one of chorus/ rehearsal which evokes the never-ending repetitiousness of the forked-tongued Islamic pseudo-pious tradition. The text continues its denigration of the African oral arts and repudiation of the corrupt and demonically cruel Saifs for fouling the past and destroying their own people
By historicizing the historic niggertrash rebellion of 1202, the text succeeds in magnifying its denigration of the African oral arts and the corrupt and demonically cruel Saifs for fouling the past.

Still deploying the oral epic mode, the narrator tells us that the proper history of the 'niggertrash' begins with an empire-wide bloodbath - a ruthless repression of the revolt of the 'worthless paupers' in 1202. This is followed by a cycle of anarchy and untold destruction of human life. *Bound to Violence* establishes the general pattern of the African holocaust by portraying what amounts to centuries of demonic violence and barbarity, naively accepted with timid resignation by the victims:

> In that age of feudalism, *large communities of slaves celebrated the justice of their overlords by forced labour and by looking on inert as multitudes of their brothers, smeared with the blood of butchered children and of disembowelled expectant mothers, were immured alive ....* That is what happened at *Tillaberi-Bentia*, at *Granta*, at *Grosso*, at *Gagol-Gosso*, and in many places mentioned in the *Tarik-al-Fetach* and the *Tarik al-Sudan* of the *Arab historians.* (p.4, my emphasis)

The griot Kutuli's recreation of the 1202 revolt not only confirms the pattern of the widespread nature of the revolt and

its equally ruthless crackdown all over the empire, but it also includes specific details of places and Arabic sources which recorded the event - a mode of presentation which is contrary to the African oral epic tradition. The text's self-conscious drawing of attention to its own textual process of coming into being as an epical history, ironically, contests the reliability of the African oral legends as historical material from which to distil pristine racial origins. This amounts to a self-referential subversion of its own status as an authentic traditional version. This creative ploy highlights the text's self-reflexive attempts at evoking its historicity, drawing the reader's attention to the focalizer of the project - the educated postcolonial griot who is aware of the difference between the *mythos* and the recorded history and is intent on locating his neo-traditional version within an 'objective' historical framework. But the reader is not fooled. The creative aim is to discredit the oral traditions which are presented as fabrications of the hereditary caste of griots, guided by their selfish aim of mystifying the rapacity of the nobility and the ruling caste.

The unidentified narrator whose corrosive tone spares neither the despotic ruling caste nor their victims, who are indicted for their subservience and metaphysical blindness, loads his portrayal of the 1202 rebellion with gory and horrific details of satanic butchery. The narrator tells us that the renowned, ancient 'griot Kutuli ... ends his tale as follows', reconfirming the novel's 'traditional' status:

> Not far from the bodies of the countless slaughtered children, seventeen fetuses were counted, expelled from the gaping entrails of mothers in death agony. Under the eyes of all, *those women had been raped by their husbands, who then, overpowered by shame, had killed themselves ... The village chief,* his lips parted *in silent, breathless resignation, drew the conclusion that human life was vain.* Though he was shaken to the point of madness, *it was nevertheless his duty to discourage rebellious minds by displaying, on a fan plaited from reeds, the ear lobes of other rebellious men from the neighboring village,* whose bodies had been converted into ashes and scattered over the river ... *The malefic spirits of those beggars, so it was said,* contaminated the waters for at least three years, obliging the few able-bodied men in the village to dig

> wells at safe distance, which were guarded at night against *the spirits of evil: upon them the mercies of the Most-High and the choicest of blessings.* (pp.4-5, my emphasis)

The atmosphere of violence, the manipulative guile of the Saifs, who turn every act of savagery to political advantage, the mindless naivete of the suffering masses, whose native wit is permanently blunted by the culture of violence and slavery - all these are emphasised by the above quotation. As already stated, the cocktail feature of Ouologuem's work is such that it defies a lineal treatment: only a holistic approach is feasible. The technique of adding climactic alerts, usually religious ones, is, as already stated, a parody of the Sunjata type of oral epics from Sudanic West Africa. Again, the proclivity of the Sudanic West African oral bards' attempts to dignify their tales either by tracing the genealogy of the epic heroes to Arabian or Near East origin and by adding Moslem moralistic appendages is being ridiculed. *Bound to Violence*, it is reiterated, is contesting the negro-African authenticity of the African epic genre. The naivete of the ancient griots is exposed in their haste to clothe the epic villains in glory and to vilify their victims, employing hollow Islamic religious jargon, oblivious of the fact that the Islamic religious tags are incongruous with the African traditional situation and sound pathetic and ridiculous.

The neo-traditional narrator remains faithful to the core of the epic tradition which projects the epic hero as a champion and a redeemer, who saves his people from the destructive impulses of demons, ogres, and evil epic villains. The evil epic villain during whose reign, the Black Messiah, Isaac Heit, is born is Saif Moshe Gabbai of Honain. The novel carefully paints the morally and the physically debilitating world the model epic hero is born into and the amount of moral muck which buries Nakem during this period. *Bound to Violence* prises open the murky underbelly of this rotten empire where even the traditional customs governing marital relationships are ideologically mystified in order to veil the satanic brutalities of the ruling elite.

The Griot Kutuli tells us that 'Not far from the bodies of the countless slaughtered children, seventeen fetuses [foetuses] were counted, expelled from the gaping entrails of mothers in death agony,' the narrative voice adds factually, without any intention to shape our construct of the tale. In accordance with traditional customs of Nakem, the disembowelment of the seventeen pregnant women - horrific abortions induced by demonic savagery of their slaughter by the ruling Saif - is customarily perceived as being caused by their being raped by their husbands. To escape their shame, the seventeen husbands kill themselves before the crowd. Then comes the climax, revealed by the village chief's declaration:

> ... it was nevertheless *his duty to discourage rebellious minds by displaying,* on a fan plaited from reeds, *the ear lobes of other rebellious men from the neighboring village, whose bodies had been converted into ashes and scattered over the river* ... The malefic spirits of those beggars, *so it was said,* contaminated the waters for at least three years ... (p.4, my emphasis).

The village chief's reaction reveals it all. Though emotionally shattered by the senselessness of the killing of the women and their husbands' suicides, the chief confirms, by his reaction, the naivete and powerlessness of the populace and demonstrates that the only recourse open to this world is a pathetic passivity. The suicides of the husbands whose wives are so demonically butchered and the docile reactions of the crowd reveal the power of ideologically manufactured African customs which are compounded by the inherent superstition of the people. As usual, the griots, who are members of the ruling hierarchy, make sure that the tale which is passed down the racial memory lane projects the victims of the violence as 'malefic spirits' of beggars. The superior social overtone, the work suggests, exposes why it is absolutely crucial to conceal their moral and spiritual emptiness in gaudy gowns of Islamic religious purity, while covertly practising all the diabolical hocus-pocus of primeval Africa.

It is within this ostentatious, thoroughly corrupt, and violent wasteland, both human and textual, that the model epic hero,

Isaac al-Heit, is born in 1421. The horrific atmosphere of the holocaust which the novel is designed to project is introduced to the reader as the structuring pattern which exercises a complete proprietorship over the novel. We are told that to forestall a prophecy that a child will be born during the following year, 1421, who will overthrow him, Saif Moshe Gabbai of Honain, kills all babies born in the Nakem Empire:

> He consigned all newborn babes to red death and lined up their shrunken heads along the wall of his antechamber. But one mother, Tiebiramina - how much more fortunate than the rest! - saved her newborn babe under the cover of night and fled, followed by her husband and three faithful servants, to Gagol-Gosso, where they settled. (pp.5-6)

The Judeo-Christian mythology which is built around the prophecy of the birth of a Messiah, the eventual birth of the Messiah and the attempts by evil rulers to kill him and the flight of his parents to safety - all these are evoked by the novel. Besides the text's assimilation of Jewish mythical sources, like Mofolo's *Chaka*, *Bound to Violence* incorporates the basic elements of the African oral epic heroism. Isaac al-Heit, the novel reveals, has a noble ancestry. His parents' fear for his life and their flight to Gagol-Gosso in order to save his life confirm his noble descent. The aristocratic lineage of the model epic hero is further reaffirmed by the fact that the hero's parents are said to have three faithful servants who follow them into exile. The most unequivocal acknowledgement of his nobility is the sentence which declares that 'The source of his power was his righteous sacrifice in renouncing his princely possessions to join a passing band of adventurers' (p.7).

The African oral epic requirement of the portentous which traditionally marks the birth of the epic hero is satisfied by the soothsayer's prophecy which warns that Saif Moshe Gabbai of Honain 'would be overthrown by a child to be born during the coming year' (1421). Then the novel, which is visibly silent on the early development of the model epic hero, gives us only a skeletal portrait of him. It is also pertinent to point out that, as a character and a model for the African legendary tradition,

Saif Isaac el-Heit is nothing but an idealistic abstraction - a rather flat character. We are given only fragments and snatches of his rites of passage. These transparent and bare statements generate some of the traditional epic heroic elements and theme-motifs of the epic folktale. Not only do they initiate the epic heroic attribute of pre-eminence but they also thematize the epic heroic motifs of quest-adventure: the hero as warrior, the hero as redeemer and the hero as saint.

The neo-traditional narrator, working from existing oral traditional portrait(s) of Isaac al-Heit, the budding model epic hero, carefully synthesizes a new legendary epic stature from the old conflicting versions. The narrator tells us that there are several versions of what happened to the baby spirited away by the parents. One account says that Isaac al-Heit, 'before going to war, was a mighty lord whose parents were living out a happy old age among the princes of Rande province' while another version states that 'his parents were massacred by ... Saif Moshe Gabbai of Honain' and 'himself pierced by an assegai', but survived. The last version, which is rather cynical and could only be that of the neo-traditional voice which perceives all actions of the ruling elites as selfishly-motivated, claims that 'he joined the troop of warriors because he was drawn to glory and the splendor of warfare' (p.6). It is difficult to determine whose account the first view is. What is crucial, however, is that we are warned about the impossibility of the authenticity of historical accounts which are constantly recreated, rewritten and laced with different layers of ideological biases. This also amounts to the text doing violence to its own birth. This textual masochism is the novel's most powerful subversion of the African legendary tradition which virtually compromises all African oral history, and this reinforces the novel's theme of violence, highlighting how we unwittingly aid tyrannical victimisers who enslave us.

The novel's self-conscious interrogation of itself is compounded by the fact that *Bound to Violence* is alleged to be a plagiarized

work which has freely massaged other texts into its textual body. This self-reflexive textuality of the novel and its sabotage of its own coming into being as text is further reinforced by the parasitic re-creation of the manuscript. The stylistic structure of the novel incorporates chaotic, multifarious sources from what seem to be a microcosm of the alien influences which shape negro-Africa's civilization - Arabic, Moorish, Indochinese, Portuguese, French, English, German and Dutch. The novel, it is evident, deliberately assimilates - and in an intentionally chaotic fashion - alien texts, sources and countless bits of ideas and modes of literary production from diverse and contradictory stylistic techniques in order to bring its ideological and creative being into textual existence. This disorderly coming into being of the novel is a mirror image of the evolution of all disciplines of the arts and indeed, all facets of human civilization.

The disorderly nature of *Bound to Violence's* manuscript - 'a fairly chaotic script, much erased and amended, with a multitude of little pieces of paper inserted and clipped onto pages, some of which have been lost' (to borrow from the anonymous critic, 'K.W.', 1972) - endorses this critical perception. The foregoing critical formulation is authenticated by the revelations of 'K.W.', which appear in his article 'In Defence of Yambo Ouologuem' (cited in Sellin, 1976:151). The anonymous critic identifies some of the forest of sources absorbed by the novel into its textual organic entity. We are told that other texts, besides Graham Greene's *Its a Battlefield* (1934) and Andre Scwartz-Bart's *Le Dernier des justes* (*The Last of the Just*) (1959) - textual scraps from 'the 16th century Portuguese explorer Lope di Piagafeta, and a modern detective story by John Macdonald ... as well as traditional epic sources in Arabic, Bambara and Amharic, and even French colonial documents that ... are still in secret achieves' (K.W., 1972:941) - have been incorporated by the novel. *Bound to Violence* constantly challenges the reader to isolate the textual fabrics which constitute its tapestry. The question of whose version

constitutes the text - a potent creative virtuosity which enigmatizes the theme of the parasitic evolution of Africa's heritage - appears to be self-consciously manipulated by the novel in order to put across its didactic message. The reader must consider whether it is the oral traditional version(s) created and re-created in Amharic, Arabic and Bambara or the versions by 'the 16th century Portuguese explorer Lope di Piagafeta', John Macdonald, Graham Greene and Andre Scwartz-Bart that constitute the novel. The multifariousness of the various points of view presented by the work becomes another powerful medium of conveying its intended message: What constitutes Africa's heritage?

Later, the reader is told that 'fugitive slaves, insurgent peasants, poor and honest, soldiers, adventurers, orphans, all manner of brave men flocked to his banner and formed his army.' (p.7) Then, the narrator makes a rather half-hearted attempt to cloak Isaac al-Heit in the traditional pseudo-supernatural legendary garb in accordance with the conventional practice in African epic orature:

> And now behold: The brave and daring Isaac al-Heit knew hunger, thirst, fever, the tumult of battle and the sight of the dying. A hundred times he was given up for dead. Each time, thanks to the favour of the most-just and the compassionate Master of the Worlds, he escaped, for his death would have been intolerable to God and to the righteous: *wassalam!* (p.7)

Though the narrator employs the hyperbolic, there is nothing bombastic about the tone. The creative ploy which is evoked to enhance Isaac al-Heit's epic heroic image is carefully restricted to the mimetic, and veers from the fabulous. The work also deliberately avoids attaching the Islamic religious alerts to moral pollutants as it does to the events depicting epic villains posing as legendary heroes. The spiritually-flavoured epithets are plausible and realistic, evoking no parodist irony or mockery. It appears the novel is trying to re-define what should constitute an epic legendary grandeur. The epic hero, *Bound to Violence* seems to imply, must be the deliverer of the suffering

masses of Africa and not an askari for alien powers. But when the narrator exalts Isaac al-Heit's epic status - 'the most pious devout Isaac al-Heit, who freed a slave each day' (p.6) - one gets the distinct feeling that there is a latent sardonic humour and an oblique sneer lurking behind the narrator's words, revealing the pervasive cynicism and the irreverence of the neo-traditional narrator.

Bound to Violence appears reluctant to endorse any epic legendary hero as legitimate. Like Mofolo's Chaka, Isaac al-Heit becomes a legend: 'He became famous. And sought-after'. We are told 'when he drew his sword: the sun and the moon shone on its blade and in it the earth was reflected as in a mirror' (p.7). This is the most ornate and pompous tone used in describing this model epic hero, and it is not surprising that he is about to become the Saif, an imperial title which is already irredeemably tainted. It demystifies the praise name - 'the most pious devout Isaac al-Heit, who freed a slave each day'. The profane and the iconoclastic neo-traditional narrator is poking fun at the griots who crafted Isaac al-Heit's legend and the dim-witted 'niggertrash' who cannot see through the ineffectual attempt at humanism by the model epic hero. The novel suggests that not even the sterling model epic hero, in whose 'greatness' the entire tradition of 'the Saif dynasty' is 'rooted' is selfless and non-exploitative enough to free all his slaves at once. However, the purity of Saif Isaac al-Heit's rule seems to be vindicated by the surrogate author's deliberate omission of certain vainglorious elitist social evils from his reign. The elements of flamboyance and self-deification, which dominate the 'celebration' of the rule of the infamous Saifs, are conspicuously absent during the reign of Saif Isaac al-Heit. Equally noticeable is the text's avoidance of the occult arts and sexual orgies in this reign.

The supernatural element of the epic genre which the novel assimilates is further reinforced by a second prophecy which openly names Isaac al-Heit as the Messiah promised to deliver the 'niggertrash' of Nakem from the butcher of babies, Saif Moshe

Gabbai of Honain. The narrator tells us that Isaac al-Heit becomes a famous ferocious warrior who 'defeated the Berbers, the Moors and the Tuareg', emerging as the sole devout military defender of Arab overlords in Arabia, Mecca, Benghazi, Tripoli, and Algiers. We are told that in Benghazi, he crushes the enemies of Imam Abu Bakr ben Omar al-Yemani and foils an attempt to assassinate the Arab overlord of Tripoli. While Isaac al-Heit is busy performing his military duties of defending Arab chieftains, the prophecy of Imam Mahmud, Grand Sherif of Mecca, is brought to him:

> "There will come a new Saif, who will quench the thirst of the men of the Nakem Empire: thou, Isaac al-Heit, art that man, thou art the first, for thou art the water and the salt and the bread, thou art holy and wilt be caliph." (p.7)

It is important to note that the novel overtly confines all the military protection offered by the epic hero to Arabia, and not a single act of military defence is given to any of the provinces of the Nakem Empire. Also crucial is the fact that the first prophecy, which predicts the overthrow of Saif Moshe Gabbai of Honain in 1420, is divined by an infidel soothsayer (the only allusion to paganism and occultism in Saif Isaac al-Heit's rule) who does not spell out any specific details about the Messiah. The latest prophetic revelation by the Islamic religious overlord of Mecca, however, specifically mentions Isaac al-Heit's name. The reader cannot help wondering whether the detailed prediction naming Isaac al-Heit as Allah's chosen Saif is not only an Arabian manoeuvre engineered to install Isaac el-Heit as the Saif of Nakem in payment for his work as an askari in Arabia and his humble submission to 'Hassanid Sherif Mulai al-Abbas', the son of the Imam of Mecca. The model epic hero is cunningly portrayed as an Arab-Islamic servant and a sycophant. The novel thus appears to be contesting the legitimacy and the negro-Africanness of the legendary source on which the Saif dynasty is rooted and suggests that it is tainted by Arab and Islamic imperialist ideology. This is the modern narrator's version of the genesis of the Saif dynasty - an account which rejects the traditional

version. It is one of the novel's most powerful repudiations of Africa's indigenous oral arts and history.

There is also the curious linkage between the infidel witch-doctor's original prophecy in 1420 about the birth of a child who will topple Saif Moshe Gabbai of Honain - a prediction which leads to the flight of Isaac al-Heit's parents - and the prophecy of the Imam of Mecca - the Islamic religion's highest authority in Arabia. This makes a subtly irreverent suggestion that there is no difference between the political exploitative impulse of African occult arts and that of the Islamic faith. Derek Wright appears to endorse this formulation when he says in his 'Orality in the African Historical Novel: Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* and Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*' that:

> The flamboyant iconoclasm in forming these literary manoeuvres insist that there was never a time when indigenous values and forms were separable from those of the Islamic Saifs: the exploitive habits of the early negro-African overlords anticipated the atrocities of the Arab invaders with whom they were happy to collaborate.
> (Wright, 1988:94)

The didactic thrust of this novel is multidimensional. It not only hurls scorn against its African traditional heritage but also against the Arab colonization and the Islamic faith, which are perceived as inseparable tools of political and ideological domination manipulated by the Arabs and the Saifs in exploiting 'the niggertrash'. If we link the novel's representation of the model epic hero, Saif Isaac al-Heit, as an Arab imperialist stooge and its portrayal of the genesis of the Saif legend/dynasty, which is projected as a miniaturized version of Africa's destiny, with the neo-traditional griot's following 'editorial' conclusion, the intended message which *Bound to Violence* is pushing down our throats becomes evident:

> For two more centuries the heart of Nakem bore such humiliations and ignominies with patience; the Crown forced men to swallow life as a boa swallows a stinking antelope, and rolled from one inglorious dynasty and sibylline genealogy to another, falling lower with each new act of vileness.... *Against this background of horror the destiny of Saif Isaac al-Heit stands out most illustriously; rising far above the common lot, it endowed the legend of the*

Saifs with the splendor in which the dreamers of African unity sun themselves to this day. (p.5, my emphasis)

The narrator's earlier sneer at Saif Isaac al-Heit's freeing a slave a day and being hailed a humanist and a devout Muslim suggests that the anti-traditional narrator is playing the role of the parodist-cum-ironist. This comment also discloses the basic ideological and historical insights of the novel. It has already been submitted that Saif Isaac al-Heit's ascension to the imperial throne of Nakem was politically engineered through Islam by Arab overlords because he was a good servant of Allah and a faithful askari to the Arab overlords. The reader is bound to question the narrator's assessment of his reign as standing 'out most illustriously'. It seems the reader is being invited to ridicule the dreamers of African unity for their political chicanery and blindness. The suggestion that his legend has become a model 'in which the dreamers of African unity sun themselves to this day' not only links the past follies to present foibles; it also confirms the view that modern African leaders have based their political ideologies on the fabulous and bombastic fabrications of grandeur, created by the pseudo-supernatural potentates of pre-colonial Africa and their devoted flatterers. The irony of it all is that, like the Saifs who ruled after Saif Isaac al-Heit, what contemporary African philosopher-presidents project as traditional African values, and have refurbished and dressed up in grandiose negro-African high-sounding political jargon, the novel intimates, are neo-African traditional values that are heavily polluted by non-negro-African ideological biases and models. The similarity of the vision of this work and Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* is more profound than we are made to believe. This citation also intimates that African civilization has assimilated different alien influences and that it is impossible to distil the "pure" African heritage and history from the past because postcolonial Africa (like pre-colonial Africa before it) continues to absorb alien influences. That postcolonial African states build their political systems on the marvellous fabrications of the legendary tradition is equivocally confirmed by the novel:

> Whether truth or invention, *the legend of Saif Isaac al-Heit still haunts Black romanticism and the political thinking of the notables in a good many republics.* For his memory strikes the popular imagination. *Chroniclers draw on the oral tradition to enrich his cult and through him celebrate the glorious era of the first States with their wise philosopher-king, whose history has called not only archaeology, history, and numismatics but also the natural sciences and ethnology* to their highest tasks.
>
> Yet it cannot be denied: if the memory of this past--glorious as it was--has survived, it is solely *thanks to the Arab historians and the oral tradition of the Africans* .... (p.8, my emphasis)

This excerpt substantiates my earlier interpretation that contemporary African political leaders build their state structures on the warrior-kingship rituals of the fabulous legendary heroes of pre-colonial Africa. The last sentence of the above passage also exposes the unholy historical marriage between African oral griots and Arab historians. The text contends that the Arab legacy to Africa is the fact that the oral sources of Africa's ancient history are shaped and informed by Arab imperialist and Islamic ideology.

Intent upon hammering home its oral matrix, the novel again reconfirms its oral status when the defeat of the epic villain by the epic hero is narrated. The vanquished tyrant Saif Moshe Gabbai of Honain, we are told, 'sought flight in safety' and 'so it is said ... died of ruptured gall bladder leaving the power to the gentle and well beloved Isaac al-Heit' (p.8). In perfect accord with the oral epic traditions, the supernatural attributes of the new Saif are then revealed to the reader in typically ornate epic language: 'His countenance was like the lightning and his gown was white; his reign was just and glorious. (God keep his soul.)' (p.8). The tone of the praise appears to be more hyperbolic as soon as Isaac al-Heit becomes the emperor. This perception seems to be borne out by a comment made earlier in the narrative by Trare, the surrogate author. Immediately Isaac al-Heit becomes a powerful young man and goes off on the epic motif-quest-adventure with his 'troop of warriors' (p.6), the postcolonial griot comments: 'At this point tradition loses itself in legend, for there are few written accounts and the

versions of the elders diverge from those of the griots, which differ in turn from those of the chroniclers' (p.6). This iconoclastic insight explains the problem of the authenticity and status of the various versions of history of Nakem-Ziuko, which are synthesized by Trare's didactic vision. Since the traditional griots are members of the ruling caste, their version is suspect. So is the chroniclers' version since theirs is the earliest written account in Islamized Africa, and an Islamic account is invariably an Arab version, which is bound to be laced with Arabian imperialist ideology. We are left with only the version of the elders, which is more likely to be less tainted with the official Saif ideology.

The re-created construct of the legend of Saif Isaac al-Heit (whose epical rites of passage are presumed to be the model) reaffirms the view that the neo-traditional griot, Trare, treats the 'God-given traditions' that are narrated by the ancient hereditary caste of griots with disrespect. We are told that 'the elders intone the famous epic (the value of which some *contest*, because they *deny* Saif's Jewish descent, insisting that *he was a plain ordinary nigger*)' (p.6, my emphasis). The tone of the dissenting voice, which, it must be noted, is in the present simple tense, cannot be that of the chroniclers, which approximates that of the Arab colonizers whose religious machinations put this Black Messiah on the throne. The griots are also easily ruled out because we do not expect them to undermine their own ideological and political value systems. The only voice likely to scoff at the ridiculous notion of the Jewish ancestry is that of the postcolonial (neo-traditional) griot who can see through the thick veils of the historico-ideological blind-folding which has been mounted through the ages by African rulers, the notables and their alien mentors.

It is equally important to note that we are talking about the humane and the celebrated Saif Isaac al-Heit, whose legendary glory, though treated with ironic incongruity, largely remains intact though his claim to Jewish ancestry is contemptuously

dismissed by the work. To shape the reader's attitude towards the Jewish origin of the model epic legendary hero, whom the novel portrays sardonically as a sterling Adamic epic hero, *Bound to Violence*, presents two conflicting genealogical versions of his ancestry. The first one, which the novel maintains, is compiled before Isaac al-Heit becomes the Saif, contends that his mother, Tiebiramina, and his father saved his life by fleeing 'under cover of night' together with their three servants 'to Gagol-Gosso, where they settled' (pp.5-6). It is pertinent to note that no mention of Tiebiramina being 'a black Jewess' is made in this first version.

The second account of Saif Isaac al-Heit's descent is completely different from the first version. It is mystified and embellished with details which the account of the first lineage lacks. It asserts:

> The Lord - holy is His Name! - showed us the mercy of bringing forth, at the beginning of the black Nakem Empire, one illustrious man, our ancestor the black Jew Abraham al-Heit, born of a black father and of an Oriental Jewess from Kenana (Canaan), descended from Jews of Cyrenaica and Taut; it is believed that she was carried to Nakem by a secondary migration that followed the itinerary of Cornelius Balbus. (p.6)

It could be argued that the first version which projects Tiebiramina and her husband as negro-Africans is based on the collective racial memory of the elders who are not members of the status quo, while the second revamped account claiming Jewish ancestry, which is seen to be more dignified than the negro-African origin, is a later official version recreated by the griots intent on enhancing the grandeur of the Saif dynasty. The sentence-transition - 'it *is* believed that she [Tiebiramina, Isaac al-Heit's mother] *was* carried to Nakem' (p.6) - exposes the restructuring hand of the modern griot, Trare, who simulates the role of an objective historian, interested only in presenting the truth, completely divested of his own personal biases. This creative ploy draws the reader's attention to how Ouologuem, using the stylistic tools of the oral epic artist and the modern historian, synthesizes, reinterprets, and rewrites the inherited

oral traditions as a neo-traditional artist recreating a new version of Nakem's historical rites of passage, which is irreconcilable with the traditional project. The ritualized impartial mode seen to be employed here is nothing but a marvellous seduction that is mounted by the author. It is evident that what we are being fed is Ouologuem's vision of how the traditional ruling elite of Africa adulterate the oral traditions and enslave their people in order to immortalize themselves in false glory.

The evil architect of the phenomenal growth and power of the second stage of Nakem's history is Saif ben Isaac al-Heit - the perverted double of Saif Isaac el-Heit. The revelations about Saif ben Isaac al-Heit's contrived early rites of passage are quite illuminating. In order to masquerade successfully as the spiritual and physical embodiment of the late Saif Isaac el-Heit, the Messianic epic hero, Saif ben Isaac el-Heit's rites of passage are meticulously contrived by his mother, who takes great care in structuring her son's personal history in strict accordance with the second prophecy about the imminent birth of the second Messiah in Nakem by baptizing him in the town (Tekrur) mentioned by the Grand Sherif of Mecca, the Imam Mahmud, giving him the model epic hero's name. The ambitious mother does not forget to add the master stroke 'ben' to 'Isaac el-Heit'. Thus Isaac ben el-Heit not only beats all the pretenders to the throne but also emerges as the master of political guile and disguises. To mimic the image of the saintly epic hero, Saif ben Isaac el-Heit meticulously creates for himself an elaborate version of the Jewish descent just like the model epic hero, Saif Isaac el-Heit had done - a claim which is scornfully dismissed by Mahmud Meknud Trare, who counters Saif ben Isaac el-Heit's absurd claim with *'Who ever heard of a black Jew?'* (p.51). Thus, the claims to Jewish descent by both the Messianic founder of the Saif dynasty and its satanic developer, 'His Royal Magnificence' (p.85), Saif ben Isaac al-Heit, are exposed as fabrications promoted by griots who, driven by their inordinate ideological ambitions, clothe their villainous royal masters in divine garb which enables them

to operate above the traditionally accepted norms of the society which is metaphysically blinded by inherent superstitiousness, ideologically intensified by the Saifs.

Bound to Violence compounds its vilification of the villainous tyrants of pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial Africa by manipulating the Jewish mythological leitmotifs of "curse", the "original sin" and the universal theme of antithesis of God and the Devil. The narrator tells that the 'sterling' legendary emperor, Saif Isaac al-Heit, is succeeded by his devout youngest son Saif al-Hilal, whose rule and life are swiftly terminated by his elder brother, 'the accursed', tyrannical and depraved Saif al-Haram. The ascendancy of Saif al-Haram not only re-enacts the cycle of the holocaust but it also initiates the second era of the rule of infamy - a reign which survives the current generation of Africans because it is symbolically and historically taken over by modern African political leaders who carry on with the rule of despotism.

The evil Saif al-Haram, drunk with sadistic cruelty and power, usurps the imperial throne and defiles the saintly dynasty founded by his father. He introduces what amounts to original sin into the Saif dynasty and Nakem by planting the seed of incest into the slimy and fertile underbelly of the Saif dynasty. We are told that:

> ... all in one night he [Saif al-Haram] married his late father's four wives - including Ramina, his own mother - and seized power, after throwing his youngest brother, the legitimate heir to the throne, into a dungeon, bound hand and foot. (p.9)

The text intensifies its disfigurement of the Saifs by indicting them for subverting the traditional values and taboos which forbid a son from marrying and copulating with his own mother. The degeneration and introduction of genetic disorder caused by Saif al-Haram's moronic sexual perversity is quickly visited upon his descendants. The reader is told that 'Saif Yussufi, one of the sons of Ramina (mother of Saif al-Haram, got with child by her son at the cost of great effort)' was '*an albino notorious*

for his ugliness' (p.16). *Bound to Violence* re-enacts the cosmic chaos which opens it - a cycle of savagery terminated by the brief interlude of sanity, breathed through this moral wasteland by Saif Isaac al-Heit, suggests that the whirlwind of despotism which strangulates Africa is bound to remain effectively in place for ever because Africa's ruling classes are inherently tainted.

Bound to Violence intimates that Saif Isaac al-Heit, the Messiah and the Saint, who begets Saif al-Haram, who is represented as the 'serpent' (p.17), symbolizes the paradoxical relationship between God and Satan. Thus Saif Isaac al-Heit, the Black Messiah's saintly legend, is gradually converted into the politics of Machiavellian guile and sadism as epitomized by his descendants: his accursed son, Saif al-Haram who takes his own mother to wife along with his other three step-mothers; his grandson, Saif Tsevi, who seduces his own sister and copulates with 'she-dogs'; and his last descendant who rules Nakem-Ziuko with a Satanic hand, Saif ben Isaac al-Heit, the fiendish master of disguise and perpetrator of politically-organized violence.

It is interesting to note that the novel persistently traces all the most diabolical sexual perversions and sadistic savagery to Saif al-Haram, the son of the saintly epic hero, Saif Isaac al-Heit. There is also a visible pattern of progression from bad to worse. The incidence of African occult arts and sorcery which is almost absent during the reign of Saif Isaac al-Heit, now appears to be looming larger and larger. From Saif al-Haram's marriage to his stepmothers and mother, Ramina, we now have Saif Tsevi's marriage to a sorceress and his participation in communal orgies with sorceresses and 'she-dogs'. Saif al-Haram's descendants turn out to be the most debauched, the text suggests, because Saif al-Haram is portrayed as the evil source of the original sin which plagues the Nakem Empire. The seeds of decay, symbolized by the incestuous relationship between son and mother, are planted into the Saif dynastic genealogy by Saif al-Haram.

The narrator links the demonic sexual voracity of 'the accursed' Saif al-Haram, the symbol of diabolical incarnation, to that of Saif Tsevi and his two brothers. This satanical sexual propensity of Saif al-Haram's descendants is powerfully articulated by the unequivocal declaration which asserts that their sexual antics are 'guided by the insolent penis of Satan' (p.20). *Bound to Violence* enigmatizes the themes of Jewish mythological curse-motif as symbolized by 'Ham's children', the original sin of Adam and Eve, and the mystical and paradoxical relationship between God and Satan. The unambiguous allusion to "Satan's insolent penis" confirms the interpretation that the text projects the Messianic legendary epic hero, Saif Isaac al-Heit, as an antithesis of the divine and the diabolical. But in this struggle between good and evil it is the forces of evil who have won the battle to control Nakem and the world.

The notion of original sin is also reinforced when the text refers to negro-Africans as Ham's descendants fated to be "the hewers of wood and drawers of water" (p.45). Though the vision of Ham's descendants is put into the mouth of the unreliable idealist, Al Hadj Ali Gakore, who asks Saif ben Isaac al-Heit whether the sons of Nakem, alleged to be *'the sons of Ham spoken of in the Scriptures'* as *'an accursed people related to that black Jewish people descended from the Queen of Sheba'* (pp. 45-46, my emphasis), are good enough to fight the Whites, the narrator's intended aim here is to reconfirm the theme of the Jewish mythology, which perceives negro-Africans as accursed slaves. This naturally reaffirms the theme of the original sin, already alluded to.

Significantly, Saif al-Hilal, the 'blessed son' (p.9) and the perfect symbol of his father's saintliness rules only for *thirteen days* before he is 'bound hand and foot' and thrown into 'a dungeon' where he is eaten alive by worms during the Holy Month of Ramadan! The reference to 'the Ramadan' and the worms eating Saif al-Hilal alive appear to be intended as a profane mockery of the Islamic faith. Ramadan, the Moslem Lent or Holy

Month, is a period of prayers and fasting. Though Saif al-Hilal is portrayed by 'the God-given traditions' as godhead, the novel sneers, he was not saved from the worms, not even though it was the holy month. *Bound to Violence*'s satirical attack appears to be two-pronged: while the novel continues its devastating deflation of pre-colonial Africa, it also ridicules the Islamic faith (and Christianity as well as all alien forces offering salvation from the local tyranny), which purports to have redeemed Islamized Africans from heading to hell by bringing them Allah's everlasting paradise.

How religion, the supernatural, and the amplification of the superstition and naivete of the niggertrash are converted into powerful instruments of absolute political control is the next concern of this investigation. The religious and physical barrenness into which the accursed son of Saif Isaac al-Heit, the evil Saif al-Haram, has turned his father's humane dynasty, is exemplified by virulent, moralistic attachments. The first is what amounts to be the novel's outrageous indictment of Islamic faith in Africa. Intent upon mantling his reign in Islamic saintliness, the demonic Saif a-Haram, sends his Tuareg slave, Abd al-Hassana, 'a scheming rogue, gentle even in his cruelty' (p.10), whom he has recently crowned 'an emperor', to Mecca on pilgrimage. On his return from Mecca, 'bearing the title "Al Hadj", 'the ex-slave' dispenses 'the holy water of the Prophet to the infidels, believing 'that he could appease the unruly, cure the palsied, and restore sight to the blind and faith to infidels ...' (p.10). Then comes the 'double-voiced' satiric trope of the profane:

> It soon became evident that *the water of the Holy City* won him no friends, did not restore sight to the blind, did not cure the palsied, and--oh sacrilege!--*did not even taste good*, or so the infidels claimed .... (p.10)

With a daring innovative witticism and cynicism *Bound to Violence* manipulates a parodist-cum-pastiche trope akin to what Gates describes in his stimulating work, *The Signifying Monkey*, as a 'double-voiced' text that talks 'to other texts' (1988:xxvi). The point of departure here is that *Bound to Violence* is not talking

to another black text, but rather to the Koran, the Islamic Holy Book, and by projection the Holy Bible. This satiric mode of the irreverent permeates this novel and unveils the demonic anger which informs and shapes its project. It is evident that it is not only traditional Africa which is divested of its borrowed garment of religious spirituality but also the source from which the borrowing has been effected.

The ideological and political need to alter all aspects of life to weapons of absolute state control, particularly the conversion of the superstition of the ruled into ideological instruments, is revealed by the simulated acts of the miracles that are "wrought" by the saintly epic hero's villainous and evil son, Saif al-Haram, and 'his acolyte Abd al-Hassana.' To mystify his assassination of eighteen notables who remain faithful to the saintly ideals of his late father, the fiendish Saif al-Haram stage-manages a miracle with the aid of his bogus Islamic marabouts. On the 20th May 1503, according to the modern bardic narrator:

> ... *with the complicity of the divine compassion,* a pyre burst into flames of its own accord, and on it eighteen notables, faithful to the memory of the just Saif Isaac al-Heit and of his youngest son, were roasted alive; as they were roasting, *eighteen slimy asps escaped from under their garments, slithered over the logs, and, guided by the invisible breath of Satan,* vanished into little holes which had miraculously appeared in the sand of the imperial courtyard, where they had been dug the day before. (p.11)

The reaction of the naive and superstitious crowd, which thinks it has witnessed a miracle, is in perfect accord with their careful conditioning. The narrator says they break 'into a long howl, as drawn-out as a lion's roar, and fell to their knees singing a hymn.' (p.11).

The purpose behind the assassination of the notables, who are committed to the old humane system of government founded by Saif Isaac al-Heit, is to pave the way for the transformation of the dynasty into something totally evil and powerful. What the reader

knows but the crowd does not know is that our reaction is being shaped by Trare, the surrogate author. It is clear, however, that the Saif must not be seen as a murderer, hence the use of trained vipers and the Islamic religious establishment's role in mystifying the political ruse through the deployment of chants of 'muezzins reciting the suras of the Koran' (p.11). In a characteristic modern African fashion, this date is declared a public holiday to be called the day of '*the fire of the vipers of the supernatural*' (p.11). It is also revealed that similar 'miracles' are wrought all over the empire. The novel's preoccupation with the theme of original sin is once again reaffirmed by its unambiguous allusion to 'the invisible breath of Satan' as the evil genius behind the assassination of the eighteen notables who are faithful to the Messianic progenitor. The griots, in their relentless efforts to add dignity to the morally-tainted tales and to mystify the truth, lace the event, as usual, with pseudo-magico-religiosity. The irony of it all is that the religious mystification exposes the truth: that Saif al-Haram is the demonic invisible mastermind directing the assassinations.

The conversion of religious rituals into political tools, initiated by Saif al-Haram, is taken over by the evil political genius Saif ben Isaac el-Heit. Saif ben Isaac el-Heit's most desperate attempt to portray himself as an Emperor endowed with supernatural powers is the incident in which the political devil incarnate, playing the Prophet Mohammed, 'miraculously' creates doves from the leaves of the Holy Koran:

> ... he [Saif ben Isaac al-Heit] spread reports of daily miracles throughout the Nakem Empire--earthquakes, the opening of tombs, resurrections of saints, fountains of milk springing up in his path, visions of archangels stepping out of the sunset, village women drawing buckets from the well and finding them full of blood; how on one of his journeys he transformed three pages of the "Holy Book," the Koran, into as many doves, which flew on ahead of him as though to summon the people to Saif's banner .... (p.25)

The five primary works chosen for this research maintain that the central core of the epic legendary tradition is the craving for

the supernatural which enables the despotic rulers to command absolute obedience from the ruled who revere any authority decked in supernatural robes. But the narratorial ironist here scornfully deflates Saif ben Isaac al-Heit's political ruse by pointing out that 'for all his subtleties and refinements ... the supernatural proved inadequate and he was obliged to revive a military art that had fallen into disuse' (p.25). Charles Monteil's 'Unpublished Notes' on Marabouts (1949, cited in Vincent Monteil, in eds. James Kriitzech and William H. Lewis, 1969) unmasks the truth of the endemic proclivity of Islamized Africans to magic and the supernatural:

> Africans are avid for all aspects of magic. The pagans have limited means: Islam has brought them, on that score, the greatest satisfaction. All Sudanese, believers or unbelievers, are faithful clients of "men who tell hidden things" - fortune-tellers or marabouts, for them it's all one and the same. These are the practices that form the bridge between Islam and paganism; these magicians of all kinds. Moslems or pagans form the liaison between the two religions, Geomancy is probably the form of magic which, thanks largely to Moslems, has taken the deepest hold among the Negroes and is the most highly esteemed.
>
> (Monteil, in eds. James Kritzech et al., 1969:97)

The existential authenticity and realism of Ouologuem's project is again reaffirmed; the heretical debunking of Islam is vindicated.

Bound to Violence not only deflates Africa's false glory but it also debunks the hollowness of Arabian-Islamic claims to spiritual and cultural superiority. The text hurls a crushing sneer at the Islamic religious tradition of measuring its spiritual purity in terms of the volume of its daily prayers. To create a religious 'safety valve', we are told, the 'niggertrash' are subjected to the absurd 'religious gymnastics of the five daily prayers of Islam' (p.23). The narrator dismisses the Islamic faith contemptuously as the '*religion, whose soul had been vomited by the clergy of Nakem.*' The novel maintains that the Islamic religion has become 'a deliberately confused mumbling about human dignity, a learned mystification' which loses 'its mystical content' and becomes nothing more than 'a means of

action, *a political weapon'* (p.23). Materialism and political power have become the driving force behind Islam and the text eloquently debunks this perversion of the sacred. With tongue in cheek, the insolent narrator declares that 'marabouts and notables entered into sumptuous polygamous marriages with the leading families of the day' (p.23) in order to control the political and the economic destiny of the Nakem empire. Like the African traditional ruler, who manipulates witchcraft and occult arts to maximize his political power, the Saifs come to use the Islamic faith purely as an instrument of political domination. The outcome of this brilliant conversion of Islam into a political weapon is the fact that the Islamic religion becomes the gateway to wearing the imperial crown, controlled by the Islamized Arabs - Nakem's veiled selection board for the Saif dynasty. The second beneficial political advantage in manipulating Islam is that *'the poor in the mind and spirit were kept busy searching and striving for Allah's Eternal Kingdom'* (p.23). The ruling caste achieves its goal - supreme power - by dangling the notion of Allah's paradise before the eyes of the ruled, flinging them 'into a bath of pseudo-spirituality, while enslaving them materially' (p.23).

The thesis of Lemuel A. Johnson's essay, 'Crescent and Consciousness: Islamic Orthodoxies and the West African Novel' (in Kenneth A. Harrow, ed., 1991:239-260), debunks the overwhelming proprietorship which Islamic aesthetics exercises over Malinke/Mandingo cosmology. The observations of the "Arts" page of *Africa* (1978:85) on Ousmane Sembene's *Ceddo* - an iconoclastic film - reveal not only Sembene's anti-Islamic feelings but also those of the bastardized Islamized masses. The Senegalese novelist and film director asserts that "Africans have been depersonalized by their conversion to Islam. It was forced upon them and they lost their traditional identity' (cited in Johnson, 1991:258, in K.W. Harrow, ed.).

The novel self-consciously maintains that the evil features of the Saif dynasty are all concentrated in and epitomized by the

evil son, Saif al-Haram, who also plants the seeds of epic heroic pomp. In order to win the notables over, after his heinous murder of his younger brother, Saif al-Haram engages in indescribable bombastic and ostentatious overindulgence. We are told the Saif and his acolyte pamper the notables with such overflow of splendour that it all sounds like a marvellous fairy tale. The notables are given 'bribes, pensions, and titles of nobility as pompous as they were meaningless' and 'their horses ... drank milk in mangers inlaid with gold and ivory' (p.11). The pattern of sadistic violence which matures into Machiavellism during the reign of the epic villain-hero *extraordinaire*, Saif ben Isaac al-Heit, is also initiated by the evil Saif al-Haram.

Another graphic illustration of how the Saifs convert both the African traditional religion and Arab-Islamic faith into political tools for maximizing their economic and political power is revealed in an incident in which Saif ben Isaac el-Heit fools the niggertrash into fighting for the French colonial government against the Germans during World War I. The outcome of this political subterfuge is that most of the disinherited folk were killed in the war and the Saif reaps economic and political rewards from their sacrifice. With a forked tongue, Saif ben Isaac el-Heit mystifies and lures the dim-witted niggertrash to their death:

> "Don't be in a hurry to meet the Most-High ... or He will punish you: a man can die of an itch for immortality. Therefore be good soldiers, fight and wait, for Heaven will not come to you until God has granted you salvation and given you His blessing. My gentle lambs, let us praise the Lord for the abundant favors and benefits He has heaped upon us by making us His devoted worshippers, so preserving us from evil. *Allahu abkar! wakul rabbi zidni ilman!*"
>
> Then Saif strode with measured step, preceded by drums, balafos, tom-toms, lambis, and trumpets, and *his sorcerers sang that he was invulnerable. His guard carried long bulls' tails which, so it was said, diverted bullets.* Kratonga, Wampoulo, and Yafole, covered with fetishes and carrying roosters, walked behind His Royal Magnificence with Madoubo, murmuring sacrificial prayers. (p.119)

This cocktail narrative unveils not only the politics of villainy which informs this novel but also another fascinating insight.

The juxtaposition of Arab-Islamic orthodoxy and traditional African "heathenism" evokes demonic iconoclasm: a heretical marriage between Islam and negro-African "paganism", produces a grotesque religious mutation which is neither Islam nor traditional African religion. The imperial witch-doctor's cabalistic celebration of Saif's invulnerability and the exhibition of "magical bulls' tails", alleged to be endowed with talismanic powers capable of deflecting bullets, not only hurls a sneer at the Saif's pseudo-Islamic spirituality but also anticipates contemporary African political leaders' tendency to flaunt their supernatural powers by carrying "magical fly-whisks", scandalously ridiculed by Armah in *Two Thousand Seasons*. The magnification of political power through religious mystification is confirmed by David Robinson in his 'An Approach to Islam in West African History' (in Kenneth W. Harrow, ed., 1991). Robinson asserts that 'In Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence,* Islam is an appendage to the state that helps to justify the slave-raiding, the harems, and the court's exploitation of the countryside and the commoner population' (Robinson, 1991:107).

The metaphysical and psychological violence wrought through mystical and religious indoctrination has now matured into naked demonic torture and butchery. In this incident (cited in detail later in pp.190-191), Saif al-Haram's horse is sabotaged by rebellious elements and he falls from it, exposing his imperial genitals to the crowd, making him decide to massacre all those who dared reveal the truth - the fact that his horse is sabotaged by rebellious elements. The affair, like all imperial acts, must be perceived superstitiously as a divine omen. Some courtiers who perceive the truth and say so are submitted to the most monstrous and fiendish cruelty and death:

> ... they were banished to Digal, where horses trampled them and shattered their limbs; with a Tuareg dagger, blessed and turned *seven times* in their eyes, their ears, their testicles, and then slowly in their navels, they were drained of their seditious blood and finally, by burning, recalled to the most-compassionate Master of the Worlds. (p.10)

This sadistic display of the beast and the evil in man, *Bound to Violence* suggests, emanates, ironically, from the son of the model epic hero, who was endowed with all the attributes of the divine in man. The most ingenious iconic invocation which rehearses the primeval cabalism of Ouologuem's world is the manipulation of the odd numbers which symbolize the ritual medium in African occult arts. Here seven is being iconographically manipulated. This locates the killing within the ritual murder matrix. The subtle question posed by the novel is why does the Messianic epic hero, Saif Isaac al-Heit, beget an evil son and why does the saintly legendary legacy which he leaves behind degenerate into an irredeemably evil dynasty? The ambiguous treatment of the theme of the genesis of man's depravity is underscored by the historical mode that is employed by the novel. Though the text persistently gives rational explanations to all ironical reversals of the epic villains, the vision of Saif Isaac al-Heit as a god-head and his evil son, Saif al-Haram, as an incarnation of Satan is cloaked in mystery. The physical world of the Nakem Empire, located in historical and present day Africa, is tainted physically and morally by the blood of the slaughtered and by the moral mess created by the degenerate Saifs.

Bound to Violence deflates Africa's notion of the pre-colonial Golden Age in a carefully foregrounded narrative. The following narrative, which epitomizes the pattern which informs and shapes the destiny of the Nakem Empire, shows how the novel conveys its message of modern Africa's bondage to a fouled history. This is achieved through the work's ingenious way of dismissing the splendour of medieval Africa by making a quack German ethnologist the sole author of the African counter-image, created by African writers and writers of the Black diaspora. Shrobenius of Germany, the parodied double of the German, Frobenius, a historical figure who fraudulently collected art works for European museums by masquerading as an ethnologist devoted to preserving African art works in West Africa, intones:

> ... It was only when white imperialism infiltrated the country with its colonial violence and materialism that this highly civilized people fell abruptly into a state of savagery, that accusations of cannibalism, of primitivism, were raised, when on the contrary--witness the splendor of its art--*the true face of Africa is the grandiose empires of the Middle Ages, a society marked by wisdom, beauty, prosperity, order, nonviolence, and humanism, and it is here that we must seek the true cradle of Egyptian civilization. (p.94, my emphasis)*

Though one of the concerns of the novel, as revealed by this quotation, is to ridicule the emergence of Euro-American Africanist academics and departments devoted to teaching African studies in Euro-American universities, the real intended nominees of this satiric trope are Black writers who romanticize pre-colonial Africa. This interpretation is potently evoked by '*it is here [Nakem Empire] that we must seek the true cradle of Egyptian civilization*' (p.94). Shrobenius' concluding construct on Africa's Golden Age debate leaves no doubt as to the novel's projected vision: 'Africa was "the womb of the world and the cradle of civilization"' (p.95). This view is lucidly articulated by the following comment by Wright: 'The novel dismisses with the same contemptuous zeal the idea of a pristine, pre-colonial value-structure, indigenously and authentically African, prior to the Arab and European incursions: this is regarded as another deluded European myth about Africa' (Wright, 1988:94). It must be reiterated, however, that the targets of this oblique satiric castigation are the Black master historians and Negritude writers from Africa and the diaspora who exhumed nostalgic roots to create a romanticized counter-image for the Dark Continent. As this critical scrutiny has so far revealed, the epical history embodied in *Bound to Violence* is a tale of ultimate demonic anger and irreverence, which divests all people of African descent of their pride in the notion of a pristine pre-colonial African ruling elite worthy of celebration.

The traditionally idealized version of medieval Africa is demolished by the work's pervasive cynical and irreverent thrust. The novel declares rather contemptuously that Africa's Golden Age, celebrated by African writers and Black writers of the

diaspora, is nothing but the parasitic life of splendour enjoyed by god-like despotic rulers - a sumptuous lifestyle made possible only by tyrants' ability to enslave and sell their people to slave traders. In retelling the murder of the slave trader, Doumbouya, by Saif ben Isaac el-Heit, whose connection with the slave trader is about to be exposed, the narrator declares that the slave trade is Africa's Golden Age - the '*golden age* when that sordid trade authorized every crime' (p.71). The work contends that it is the exploitation of the slave trade which enabled medieval African traditional rulers to present themselves as fabulously rich demi-gods who were accepted unquestionably by the bastardized masses. Africa's heritage, it is asserted, has been polluted by alien values for centuries and there is no pure African Golden Age awaiting rediscovery. The novel suggests that there is no unsullied Africa, for every fabric of the moral tapestry of the continent has been appropriated by an all-embracing and all-consuming unwholesomeness. Africa's history and civilization, are, by implication, irretrievably tainted.

The text heightens its satirical strictures on the Saifs by deploying its usual demonic ironic mode, loaded with dark humour and the profane. Like Ayi Kwei Armah's ritual cleansing of the moral muck created by Arab predators and Akan slave-kings, which is evoked by a verbally-rotten and bawdy narrative mode in *Two Thousand Seasons*, Ouologuem employs an equally profane narrative mode in his revolting portraiture of the thoroughly debauched and corrupt Saifs, whom he submits to an endless cycle of ironic inversions. The text unfolds the Saif gallery of infamy, immorality, and chaos as follows:

> On April 20, 1532, on a night as soft as a cloak of moist satin, Saif al-Haram, performing his conjugal "duty" with his four stepmothers seriatim and all together, had the imprudent weakness to overindulge and in the very midst of his dutiful delights gave up the ghost .... The next day his raven-eyed minister Al Hadj Abds al-Hassana, having established a stripling boy and Hawa, the most beautiful of Saif's stepmothers, in his bed, was stung by an asp which he was caressing in the belief that he was holding something else, opened his mouth wide three times, and died .... His successor was his cousin Holongo, "a horrible biped with the brutal expression of a buffalo", humped in

> front and back; after a reign of two years, moaning in enviable torment, he died in the arms of the courtesan Aiosha, who strangled him as he was crying out in ecstasy. His successor was Saif Ali, a pederast with pious airs, as vicious as a red monkey, who succumbed six months later to the sin of gluttony, leaving the crown to Saif Jibril, Ali's younger brother, who, slain by the sin of indiscretion, was replaced by Saif Yussufi, one of the sons of Ramina (mother of Saif al-Haram, got with child by her son at the cost of great effort). An albino notorious for his ugliness, he was twice felled by one of his wife's admirers; the third time - at last! - much to his amazement, he was carried off by an ill wind, ceding his place to Saif Medioni of Mostaganem, who was recalled to God ten days later, torn to pieces, so it is said, by the contrary angels of Mercy and Justice. Then the last children of the accursed Saif and of his stepmothers reigned successively: Saif Ezekiel, who was dethroned after four years; Saif Ismail, reduced to impotence for seven months, then forced to abdicate; and the third, Saif Benghighi of Saida, somnolent for five years: as though the court were condemned to have no tongue but a forked one. (p.16)

This intricate narrative is thus carefully crafted to deflate the perverse immoral sexual overindulgence of the various royal villains whose lives are terminated at the climax of their various acts of carnality. Thus most of the Saifs, whose existence is centred around a seemingly endless erotic paradise of overflowing debauchery, have their lives terminated like that of Saif al-Haram who dies, appropriately, while busy copulating with his four stepmothers, including his own mother. The novel meticulously paints a harrowing picture of overwhelming chaos, imperial moral bankruptcy and stench which heralds an impending disintegration. Determined to shape the reader's construct of the text, the cynical neo-traditional narrator recounts how three of Saif al-Haram's sons meet their deaths, linking them to their depraved accursed father:

> Years without glory, swallowing their shame in oblivion. And since all three of those Saifs seemed to have been born of *a serpent* - their *accursed father* - they awaited the coming of the icy death empty-handed, without hope or courage. In Tillaberi-Bentia they had reached such a state of helplessness and dejection that they dozed from morning till night on the great square beneath the council tree, reduced to recalling the glorious days of the just Saif Isaac al-Heit. The perseverance with which they devoted themselves to grandiose dreams soon earned them Heavens

> mild compassion: all in the same night they were carried away by ... *three asps*. O tempora! O mores .... (p.17)

The allusion to Saif al-Haram as 'a serpent' rehearses the theme of Africa's original sin and divine curse. The poetic justice evoked here recalls how Saif al-Haram roasts half-dead notables on a huge funeral pyre after they have been rendered unconscious by being bitten by trained asps. The stylistic patterning of *Bound to Violence* is so complex that every single narrative structure submitted to textual analysis reveals a multiplicity of meanings. The work does not seem to be content with vilifying only the political crimes of the traditional rulers of Africa and their heirs - the modern philosopher-negritudist leaders of postcolonial Africa. Instead, it appears to be issuing a vague warning to African rulers. That this voice of warning does not project divine retribution or poetic justice is eloquently made by the text which veers from the supernatural because it is self-consciously rooted in historicity. What the work strains to put across is the view that despite the overwhelming power and organised violence of the rulers, the counter-violence that is naturally generated by their politically-motivated destruction is bound to subvert their own political power base.

In a classic example loaded with bawdy humour and caustic ironic reversal, the insolent narrator recounts the triumphant return of Saif al-Haram from a slave-raid, projected as a legendary war of glory. We are told:

> ... Then the Emperor Saif al-Haram, the wicked brother and accursed son -- God's malediction upon him! -- returned from war against the Fulani escorted by twelve thousand Tukulor slaves to Tillaberi-Bentia, the capital, where the people, crushed beneath the sun, were waiting at the gates. His horse pranced majestically as he saluted the frantic crowd. To his right notables, chiefs of the various provinces, court dignitaries, to his left women, children, and old men, behind him the army flanked by long rows of slaves with shackled ankles. A triumphal homecoming; his victories seemed to have washed away his taint.
>
> Entering the courtyard of his palace in full pomp, he was about to alight from his horse to greet his wives, who were at the same time his stepmothers, when suddenly -- such be the fate of those who curse Thee!--his horse shied; in his fall he tore the short trousers of his blue tunic,

> exposing his nether regions to the crowd in the manner of Adam at his birth. (p.9)

Bound to Violence achieves its thrust by satirising the evil Saifs, clothed in the borrowed robes of the legendary heroes, and constantly submitting them to contemptuous ironic reversals. On his return from a successful slave raid against the Fulani, the victorious Saif al-Haram, craving for the legendary hero's welcome which awaits him, sets out to receive the expected public acclaim. But this is not to be. On 'entering the courtyard of his palace in full pomp', Saif al-Haram, "the legendary warrior", falls from his horse as he is about to alight in order to greet his wives, tearing his royal robes in the process and exposing his royal naked body to the stunned crowd. The most ego-shattering aspect of Saif al-Haram's humiliation is the fact that this happens in full view of the notables, his wives (stepmothers and mother), 'the niggertrash' and the recently captured Fulani slaves. This is a clear example of poetic justice or divine retribution, but the text eschews the supernatural, grounding all events on historical rationalisation. It is evident that the text's creative aim is to ridicule the ostentatious attempts by villains masquerading as national heroes and the great lengths they go to in their relentless endeavour to immortalize themselves in false glory. To intensify the diabolical nature of the 'accursed son' of Saif Isaac al-Heit, whom the text perceives as the source of original sin, *Bound to Violence* submits him to a multidimensional treatment.

The virtuosity of Ouologuem's style will be lost if the manner in which the author exploits the above incident to reveal the naivete and the superstitiousness of the suffering masses and the nobility is not explored here. The following are the reactions of 'the niggertrash' to this unwholesome royal display:

> Stunned, *the crowd bore loud witness to its inborn imbecility*, for it saw the incident as a divine omen.... Several witnesses declared that someone had deliberately filed the horse's girth to provoke a scandal. Their [those who realistically interpreted the event] ears were pulled, their heads were shaved, and crosses were tattooed on the soles of their feet in order that each one of their steps

> might be an offense to God; the imperial sorcerer threatened to curse their fathers, mothers, ancestors, and descendants; and certain courtiers, who had been denounced, were obliged to confess their falsehood to *God, who spoke to them through the sorcerer* .... (p.10, my emphasis)

Bound to Violence persistently maintains that the root cause of Africa's endemic tyranny is the '*inborn imbecility*' of the ruled, whose naivete is nourished by the ruling elite's judicious ideological indoctrination which compounds the people's superstitious nature. We are told that, though 'Several witnesses declared that someone had deliberately filed the horse's girth to provoke a scandal', the natural reaction of the niggertrash, meticulously brainwashed to perceive a divine hand in everything, declares that the deliberate politically-motivated sabotage is God's work. The demonic punishment meted out to those who dare interpret the event rationally reveals how far the saintly dynasty created by the Black Messiah, Saif al-Heit, has been irredeemably corrupted and altered. We are told that 'their heads were shaved and crosses were tattooed on the soles of their feet in order that each one of their steps might be an offense to God'. This amounts to an ironic inversion of a world in which the innocent victim is treated as a symbol of the forces of evil by the devil, clothed in the celestial robes of Islam. The text again evokes the perception which projects the view that Islam and traditional African cabalistic religious practices are harmoniously blended. The idea of repentant courtiers confessing their sins to God through *the royal sorcerer* is not only sacrilegious but also a creative posture of sublime demonic iconoclasm. But there is an enigmatic insight unveiled by this vision: the unknowableness of God and the timeless mystery of how to reach Him. This demystifies the novel's coupling of the Islamic-Voodoo prophecies which enshrine the Saif dynasty - an aspect which has already been mentioned.

The vileness of Saif al-Haram is further explicated by this cocktail narrative which embodies within its boundaries intricate layers of commentary. The narrative points out that Saif al-Haram attempts to divert the people's attention from his abominable

crimes against his own family by trying to cleanse his moral rot and the blood of his brother off his hands by masquerading as a legendary martial hero. This political stratagem is accomplished by spilling more blood and capturing Fulani slaves through a slave raid which is mystified as a war of glory and epic heroism. The ingenuity of Ouologuem's innovative style is that the narrative also unmasks how past foibles lead naturally to worse future follies. This perception is further borne out by Trare's cynical comment: 'his victories seemed to have washed away his taint' (p.9). It is self-evident that Trare, the neo-traditional griot, does not see Saif al-Haram's capture of 'twelve thousand Tukulor slaves' - whose destination is the mucky belly of the European slave ship - as a victory.

Bound to Violence intimates that, in spite of the carefully nurtured image of invincibility and omnipotence, which the Saifs and African rulers in general portray, they are fated to a life fraught with paradox. This view is affirmed by the novel's deflation of attempts by notables to put pretenders who are clothed in the saintly name of Isaac al-Heit on the imperial throne. But this is not to be:

> In the hope of a black messiah, a Commander of the Faithful who would save the imperial tradition, the noble families of Rande province began to baptize their children by the name of Saif Isaac al-Heit. To no avail, for in His infinite compassion the Eternal sent an epidemic of yellow fever which in less than a month destroyed all hopes, decimating the ranks of the pretenders to the throne. (p.17)

It appears as if the unconcerned Allah is all of sudden compassionate and determined to fight on behalf of 'the niggertrash'. But there is no evidence in the text to suggest that the hand of Allah is in the scheme of things. For, as this analysis contends, the novel evokes the historical mode which requires factual and clinical presentation of data; the constant reference to dates, places and cross references to 'historical landmarks' are part of Ouologuem's creative technique. Every mysterious event has a rational explanation. However, the niggertrash, fastidiously baptized in ideological pseudo-

spirituality by the evil Saifs, and later by bogus Islamic marabouts and Christianity, see the supernatural in everything. What we have here is purely a coincidence: yellow fever, a deadly epidemic, coming at an opportune moment.

Perhaps the text's most corrosive ironic inversion visited upon degenerates who pose as legendary heroes in this novel is how the satanical sexual pervert Saif Tsevi's glutted sexual eroticism is terminated with a humiliating death. Saif Tsevi, the impudent incestuous debaucher of his own sister, is submitted to what looks like the law of karma:

> .... After lamenting his Berbero-Jewish favorite Jehoshua, Saif Tsevi, an obstinate lecher, hastened to marry Lyangombe, a black sorceress belonging to a secret society of sorcerers and magicians, whose traditional ancestor was represented as a bi-sexual being .... In those saturnalia incest was permitted and recommended; human sacrifices were performed, followed by acts and coitus with animals .... Saif Tsevi and his other two brothers, Sussan and Yossef, who--guided by the insolent penis of Satan--were present that night, were found by peddlers the next day, all three naked, their throats ripped open by the she-dogs they had been copulating with, which lay strangled in their arms. (p.20)

But the supernatural is, as usual, eschewed self-consciously by the text intent upon grounding its narrative structure on the historical and the empirical modes. The deaths of Saif Tsevi and his brothers, who are found clutching the bodies of the she dogs they had copulated with is one of the text's most daring and brazen invocations of the profane. The intended thrust of this event, however, is the novel's subversive ironic negation of the epic villains - a narrative technique, aimed at symbolically stripping the ruthless despots of their hollow glory.

The struggle for the imperial crown continues and so does the text's persistent reversal of all attempts to put a pretender on the throne. Then a political opportunist, Saif Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai, the last descendant of 'the accursed Saif al-Haram', mounted a horse and with a cutlass in hand, 'approached the bed of the evil spirits of the imperial Court, and with one blow dispatched the malefactors from sleep to death' (p.17). For eight

years he enjoys the fruits of his powerful legendary wielding of the cutlass which wipes the evil princes off the face of the earth. But then comes the built-in ironic boomerang:

> At the feast of Tabaski, wishing to savor his popularity amidst the acrid armpits of his subjects and the fragrant perfume of the ladies of the Court, he suddenly fell to the ground and kissed the dung-covered hoofs of his horse. 'The evening dew moisted his temples', says the chronicle; clutching the arrow that had pierced him, he had no time to say amen and to become a victim.' A tear for him.
> (pp.17-18)

The central concern of this narrative is the fact that Saif Rabban Johanan ben Zakkaihe dies while straining 'to savor his popularity' and, humiliated, expires kissing 'the dung-covered hoofs of his horse' instead of dying ennobled and kissing the fragrantly perfumed 'ladies of the Court' (p.18). The cycle of ironic inversions which plague the notables and the Saifs, as they assassinate one another in their jostling for the imperial crown, presages the inevitable disintegration. 'The Empire,' so the narrator tells us, 'was crumbling .... The Saif dynasty went from bad to worse ...' (p.18). The great empire is finally reduced to a 'dismembered ... multitude of kinglets who aped one another ....' (p.22). The decay is almost complete. The work maintains that for many generations all royal favours and titles are hawked like petty merchandise at the pawn-broker's or at the market-stalls:

> For two hundred years courtiers, peasants, warriors, slaves, and *artisans sang their praises, filling their pockets, and swarming around the imperial cheese, in whose stench anyone with an ounce of ability could hope,* in emulation of the Court, to obtain lands cattle, titles of nobility, money, and everything it buys, including women. (p.18, my emphasis)

The tone of condemnation has reached an unprecedented level. The novel reveals that for two centuries imperial favours and titles could be bought at 'flea-bitten' (p.18) prices. The decay and the rot of the dynasty has worsened so much that 'the imperial cheese' around 'whose stench' petty title seekers swarm like green house flies is portrayed in the most disgusting terms. The vision that is conveyed is that many rulers of Africa, past and

present, are ineffectual leaders who have successfully concealed their ineptitude under some 'dreamlike mumbo jumbo' political ideology based on a pseudo-supernatural image - political tactics which have been used successfully in fooling the people since the cradle of civilization. In his 'Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?', Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that the author of *Bound to Violence* questions 'the celebratory novels of the early sixties ... he rejects, indeed assaults, the conventions of realism' because of the following:

> He seeks to delegitimate the forms of the realist African novel, in part, surely, because what it sought to naturalize was a nationalism that, by 1968, had plainly failed. The national bourgeoisie that took the baton of rationalization, industrialization, and bureaucratization in the name of nationalism, turned out to be a kleptocracy ...
>
> (Appiah, 1991:349)

Appiah concludes that 'Africa's postcolonial novelists, novelists anxious to escape neocolonialism, are no longer committed to the nation.' We are told that 'what they have chosen instead of the nation is not an older traditionalism but Africa - the continent and its people' (Appiah, 1991: 353).

As we move nearer to the twentieth century, the narratorial voice, which is no longer oblique, adopts a direct tone whose repudiation is no longer subtle and ironic. Instead of the ironic, the narrative voice becomes increasingly satirical and unambiguously profane and virulent. The notables are dismissed scornfully as 'riffraff who had made it their business to dominate the Nakem people by bastardizing them'. The state of affairs is compared to the year 1532 and we are told that the nobility is 'apparently doomed more than ever to ruin' (p.17). The detrimental effect of the legend of the Messianic Saif Isaac al-Heit, which forms the basis of all African political systems for over seven centuries, is described as follows:

> Amid unspeakable corruption the coffers were empty, and men weary in their hearts. In the hope of a black messiah, a Commander of the Faithful who would save the imperial tradition, the noble families of Rande province began to baptize their children by the name of Saif the Just, Saif Isaac al-Heit. (p.17)

But these attempts to produce pretenders to the imperial throne are all shattered when the populace is wiped away by an epidemic. The novel re-enacts the Arabian connection - the bogus prophecy by Imam Mahmud of Mecca which put Messianic Isaac al-Heit on the throne comes to the rescue again. The last part of the same 'holy' prediction declares:

> "After thee, another caliph, descended from the province of Tekrur of the Nakem Empire, will come at the end of the thirteenth century of the Hegira, and the sun will shine on his reign; on both of you God will shower riches, power, and glory, which you will expand on things agreeable to Him". (p.7)

It is submitted that in order to debunk how Africa's racial origins are mystified in Arabian and Islamic imperialist ideology, we must exhume and investigate the role of Arabian and Islamic imperialism in putting the Black Messiah, Saif Isaac al-Heit, and the epic villain extraordinaire, Saif ben Isaac al-Heit, his double and descendant, on Nakem's imperial throne. The interpretation that the novel projects a vision which links Africa's racial legendary traditions to Arabian imperialist ideology, cloaked in Islamic religious subterfuge, is substantiated by this mystical connection between the Saif dynasty and its invisible mentors, the Arabs and the Islamic religion. The text eloquently confirms this view in the following words:

> Had the Imam Mahmud, the grand sherif of Mecca, not predicted that in the thirteenth century of the Hegira a caliph would come from Tekrur? And was this not Saif ben Isaac al-Heit, whose mother, "that the commandments of the Eternal One might be fulfilled" had arranged to bring him into the world and baptized him in Tekrur on the date foreseen by the prophecy and the legend? ...
>
> Luckily for Saif, he played the messiah well, for in that same role countless scions of the aristocracy had run themselves ragged and emptied their pockets in vain. Not every man can be Christ. Forgive us, O Lord, for revering so assiduously the cults in which men have clothed Thee.... (p.23)

The above bogus prophecy by the Imam Mahmud of Mecca becomes the blueprint used by Saif ben Isaac el-Heit's mother in creating a royal "CV" for her son -the Islamic-oriented personal portrait which persuades the Arabs and Islamic Overlords into supporting

his imperial claim to the Nakem throne. Like the Messianic Saif Isaac al-Heit, his forefather, Saif ben Isaac al-Heit, ascends the throne by exploiting the bogus Islamic prophecy of the Imam Grand Sherif of Mecca. The foulness of racial origins which was initiated by his ancestor is intensified by Saif ben Isaac al-Heit. In effect, the political, racial and moral rot unwittingly generated, ironically, by the saintly epic hero, is nourished by his descendant, the most evil of the Saifs, who is represented as his symbolic double. By overtly dismissing the Islamic prophecy as phoney, the narrator reveals his own subjective ideological bias towards the African oral traditions.

It is crucial to note that as evil and corruption engulf Nakem through the passage of time, it becomes apparent that only a thoroughly corrupt, sadistic and diabolical emperor can govern it. The novel's self-conscious re-enactment of the formal African epic mode clearly suggests that a portentous stage of the tale is reached: the crowning of 'His Royal Magnificence', Saif ben Isaac el-Heit, as emperor of Nakem. Of all the many Saifs who came and went, no systematic attempts have been made to explore their genealogy. The narrator consciously alerts the reader's attention to the fact that the chaos and the disintegration which characterize the death of the Messianic hero, Saif Isaac al-Heit, is about to be reversed by a hero far more fascinating, far more savagely and diabolically gifted, far more ruthlessly efficient than any of the others. By juxtaposing the disintegrating image of Nakem with the powerful Machiavellian reign of Saif ben Isaac al-Heit, the narrator invites the reader to take note of the novel's didactic message: how the structuring pattern of the inglorious will be masterfully and ideologically veiled from the dim-witted 'niggertrash' by Saif ben Isaac al-Heit, the epic villain-hero *extraordinaire* - the antithesis of the Messianic hero, Saif Isaac al-Heit.

Bound to Violence's conscious magnification of the demonic epic villain's role in the development the plot is highlighted by the textual historicizing of his birth as a significant landmark.

Just as the beginning of the history of 'the bloody adventure of the niggertrash' is anchored in their revolt of 1202 and its ruthless repression, Saif ben Isaac al-Heit's monumental role as a Machiavellian ruler in the second stage of the bloody holocaust is entrenched in history. The most crucial stage of the tale is initiated as follows:

> Thus, *eighteen years before the arrival of the Whites, thirty years after the birth, in the maternal line of the Saifs, of Saif ben Isaac al-Heit (that is, Saif son of Isaac al-Heit)*--the notables recalled the people to the "supreme values of peace, order, and tradition, luminously exemplified by God Himself." (p.22)

The text evokes its historicity by alluding to the birth of the epic-villain par excellence, coupling his epic heroic birth with another birth - the advent of Europeans in Nakem. The background of the second phase of the satanic human bloodbath is being set, or rather the chess board is being set and the two major players have been identified: Saif ben Isaac al-Heit and 'the Whites'. But the game of chess cannot be played without the chess pieces and so the text locates the pawns - 'the people'. Thus, like the opening paragraph of the novel which sets the backdrop of the niggertrash adventure, the opening paragraph of the second section sketches the backdrop. The all-embracing fulcrum around which this world gravitates, however, the Machiavellian Saif ben Isaac al-Heit. Confirming the omnipotence of the Saif, the novel asserts that Saif ben Isaac al-Heit is 'The Pillar of Nakem Empire' (p.22).

The work continues its ironic treatment of the Messianic image of Saif Isaac al-Heit by presenting the evil epic villain as his natural successor and the mainstay of his legend, which would not have been founded without Arab and Islamic support. Trare, the neo-traditional griot, anxious to lead his reader to the intended aim of his project, says, '... Saif ben Isaac al-Heit--who, so it is said, resembled his ancestor Saif Isaac al-Heit in every feature--was a staunch believer in the above-mentioned principle of *spiritual advancement*' (p.22). Trare's questioning voice is revealed by the phrase 'so it is said', alerting us to the fact

that he does not endorse the official version's attempt to project the evil hero in the image of the Messianic hero and that the presentation of the physical likeness between Saif Isaac al-Heit and the evil Saif ben Isaac al-Heit, his descendant, is a sanctioned fabrication created by the griots. This perception is borne out by the novel's disdainful rejection of the trumped up official version of the oral history that attempts to elevate in status to a level far above that of the niggertrash not only in a political sense but in a racial sense as well Saif ben Isaac el-Heit's rule by claiming that he is a Black Jew.

It is important to recall that Saif Isaac al-Heit's claim to Jewish descent is questioned by both the nativist elders and by Trare, the postcolonial narrator. Similarly, his double, Saif ben Isaac al-Heit's claim to Jewish ancestry is contemptuously rejected by Trare, in his role as the modern griot. The novel dismisses Saif ben Isaac al-Heit's elaborate claim to Jewish origin with the usual ideological cynicism and scorn:

> A number of learned natives whispered very softly what they called "the truth": *that Saif was a mere imposter' that there was no more Jewish blood in him than green blood in a nigger. "Why does this miscreant claim to be a Jew? Solely to prove that his ancestry makes him superior to the niggers, whom it is his mission - his as much as white man's - to civilize.* Naturally, niggers can't manage their own affairs or govern themselves. *Who ever heard of a black Jew?* (p.51-52, my emphasis)

The work's repeated reference to the conflicting nature of the versions of the history of Nakem as recreated from racial memory amounts to the text's self-conscious subversion of its own evolution as a work of art. Unlike Armah, who believes in the efficacy of racial memory, Ouologuem does not think there are any unsullied negro-African traditions waiting for racial excavation and retrieval, for all fabrics of human civilization are irredeemably fouled through the passage of time. It is asserted that Saif ben Isaac al-Heit is 'a mere imposter' and a miscreant who claims to be a Jew to prove that he is 'superior to the niggers, whom it is his mission - his as much as white man's - to civilize"' (p.50-51). This debunks the Sudanic West African

griots' tendency to clothe the legendary heroes of their epic tales in Arabian or Jewish genealogy. That the details of this claim to Jewish origins are radically different from the two previous ones exposes its lack of authenticity and reaffirms the view that there is no such thing as objective history since each historical account is tailor-made to suit the author's purpose, and is shaped by his subjective and ideological biases.

This unwholesome alien feature of the 'God-given traditions' is ironically exposed by its own contradictions. The adulteration of the sacrosanct traditional values is demystified by the constituents of '*spiritual advancement*' on which Saif ben al-Heit grounds his reign. The spiritual essence of oral traditions is described as follows:

> With the support of the sheiks, emirs, and ulemas, he formed a union of the aristocrats and notables throughout the Empire who, setting aside their lemon-yellow barouches at the doors of the mosques, practised Islam with great humility and converted the fetishist populace who were beginning to be dismayed at the blackness of their souls. This made it still easier to hold down the people and exploit them. And the Evil One shall be driven out! (p.22)

The voice of rebuke in this extract is not that of the traditional griots but that of the dissident Trare, who has no respect for the 'God-given traditions'. The spiritual education and progress, decreed by the Saif as an official policy, is an alliance between the Islamic and the local notables with a view to exploiting the dim-witted masses by indoctrinating them through the mumbo-jumbo of Islamic religious piety. The niggertrash who are now 'dismayed' at their own evil nature, accept all forms of tyranny, believing that 'in ... not too distant day ... a world would dawn in which a serf would be the equal of a king ...' (p.22). The master of political disguises, Saif ben Isaac al-Heit, in order to craft his new image in accordance with the blueprint drawn on the legend of the Messianic Saif Isaac al-Heit, converts all facets of the legendary epic genre into one huge role: the magnification of the legendary grandeur of the Saif.

Since the success of this political ideology depends upon the mystification and the veiling of the manipulating hands of the Saif from the public, various covert ways of committing political crimes are perfected and the supernatural becomes the cornerstone of his rule. Saif ben Isaac al-Heit is the fulcrum around which this world revolves. This is eloquently confirmed by the comment that when he is told that Lt Huygue, whose daughter becomes deranged after witnessing the diabolical way in which the Saif assassinated Governor Chevalier, the self-appointed Lord of the universe breaks into the Lord's Prayer and 'the birds chirped in response' (p.117), acknowledging his supreme control over all living creatures. To remain the mastermind who controls the destiny of every living creature in Nakem, Saif ben Isaac al-Heit re-initiates the vortex of terror, sex, barbarities, and man's total devotion to bestiality and primeval primitivism, previously eliminated by the model epic hero, Saif Isaac al-Heit. But this policy of violence and savagery is ingeniously screened from the naive populace with mystifying pseudo-spiritual ostentation. How he has achieved this is the novel's most damaging repudiation of Africa and its bondage to history. *Bound to Violence*, intent upon depicting the emperors of Nakem as corrupt, inept and hollow men posing as legendary heroes, immortalizes the Saifs in what amounts to a permanent gallery of the infamous, like the Akan slave-kings in Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*.

Saif ben Isaac al-Heit's desperate excavation of an array of ancient African warrior tactics in his attempts to ward off the French colonial invasion generates a web of fascinating nuances:

> Assegais, lances, poisoned arrows, javelins, machetes, daggers, sabers and muskets, weapons of every kind, all thrice blessed by Saif ben al-Heit, were issued to the warriors ... at the same time, riding black mules, sorcerers, charmers of vipers and boas, magi, criminals specializing in ordalic murder, herborists, expert in poisoning and in the treatment of wells and ponds, assassins versed in the use of venomous plants, lethal objects, and terrifying animals, thronged to the banner of country and religion: fetishes, warriors, snakes, bees,

> wasps, arrows, elephants, panthers--these were the tanks of the Nakem resistance. (p.26)

Firstly, this excerpt puts the entire accumulated military history of the Nakem Empire on textual display, revealing cunningly not only her absorption of alien military techniques but also re-initiating the ancient politics of demonic violence and savagery. On the superficial level, the narrative extract quoted above appears to be concerned with only the chaotic array of death-dealing instruments that Nakem can draw on to defend itself against the French colonizers, guided by the ancient African military tradition of relying solely on the natural resources of Africa in times of alien invasion. The text lists some of these resources as follows: 'the gold dust ... hidden in the hollows of elephants' tusks, in ivory knic-knacs, or in little antelope horns set in red leather' and 'black gold' - slaves (p.26). But beneath the surface textuality, there emerges a weird insight, enigmatizing the textual being of the novel, re-ordering the disorderly list of primitive weapons of death. It appears the novel, through its exploitation of the list of death-dealing weapons, endorses the view that the evolution of Africa's civilization is a development which defies order. The historical development of implements of war ranges from Africa's crude prehistoric past to its acquisition of Arabian and European weapons of warfare. The 'poisoned arrows', and the 'assegais' reveal the negro-African phase of the development, the Arab era is symbolized by 'sabers' and 'daggers' and the European period is evoked by 'muskets' while the projected final military goal is 'the tanks' - a modern military hardware coupled with deadly chemical weapons that also have their crude African genesis or mirror-image - suggesting that Africa's sordid development is a miniaturized version of world civilization. And so the mockery directed at Africa is also aimed at the rest of the world, for Africans, the text implies, are not the only people fouled by history. Traditional Africa's inoculation of warriors by the traditional war-doctor is taken on by Saif himself - the royal witch-doctor posing as a 'civilized' devout Moslem. Like Chaka's warriors, doctored by Malunga and Isanusi in Mofolo's *Chaka*,

Saif's naive warriors believe that if they die they will go to Allah's eternal paradise:

> The warriors blessed by Saif--who held out his sword to the right of him and opened up a passage as wide as a village street--thought themselves invulnerable; with fury painted on their faces, thousands of them went home to the old moons; but, so it was said, "they did not die, they went to meet the Most-High." *Djalle! Djalle! Amoul bop! Makoul falle!* (p.26)

But this illusion, carefully fostered by Saif ben Isaac al-Heit, is dispelled by the novel: 'thousands went home to the old moons' - the traditional mythical homes of the dead in Bambara cosmology. The war against the French colonial power is lost but Saif ben Isaac al-Heit remains the supreme champion of Nakem because, through a deployment of Machiavellian guile, he is able to eliminate all his enemies, drawing on the wild primeval natural resources of Africa. His greatest success is in having poisonous snakes trained by his 'scientists' - sorcerers - for covert assassinations. That this cunning and demonic knave is elusive is revealed in the following citation which shows how the epic villain *par excellence* 'submits' and signs the treaty of surrender:

> The Empire was pacified, broken up into several zones which the Whites divided .... Saif was returned under military escort to his palace .... As marabouts prayed and griots in the courtyard sang his praises, the emperor, his sole-remaining younger son at his right side, ordained silence and, on that twentieth day of December 1900, awaited the peace treaty he was to sign.
>
> Surrounded by his court as magnificent as in the days of his glory, clothed in the imperial insignia, he sat on his throne; his feet rested on *satin carpets* embroidered with golden flowers. Over his short tunic he wore a large, *richly embossed dashiki*, open at the throat; *from his neck hung two fetishes,* on his head *a fez surrounded by a jet-black turban;* on his legs *dark trousers* and on his feet *Moorish boots with hippopotamus hide soles.*
>
> Raising his arms, he set upon his head *a golden diadem* whose points were *studded with pearls.* Soberly but richly clad, his royal retinue were more dejected ...
>
> ... Behind the emperor, *two masters-at-arms*, dressed all in red, thrust their assegais into the ground and stood motionless in an attitude of barbaric nobility, their arms extended as though to swear an oath. In their left hands they held *a sharpened axe* and *a silver mace fastened with lion hide*, the emblem of royalty. *Two gleaming muskets* were slung over their shoulders. On the faces they wore *masks*

made from the skin of the king of beasts. (p.32, my emphasis)

The phrase that Saif ben Isaac al-Heit is 'surrounded by his court as magnificent as in the days of his glory, clothed in the imperial insignia', and seated 'on his throne' (p.32) intimates his refusal to be coerced, at least symbolically. But let us first consider the multiplicity of insights generated by this cocktail narrative. The reference to the praying marabouts and the praise-singing griots unveils the union between the traditional flatterers and the Islamic religious sycophants. Their aim is to glorify the emperor, no matter how humiliating the situation is. The brazen golden ostentation of the Saif's court reveals the author's rationale for choosing this particular era of Africa's history for the continental divestment of Africa's false pre-colonial image - the condemnation of African rulers who veil their impotence in hollow splendour and a display of wealth, particularly gold.

On textual scrutiny, the objects of royal pomp which crowd this narrative project a vision of the syncretic evolution of Africa's heritage. The masks made of lion skin and the cabalistic amulets which deck the Saif's neck symbolize pure negro-African primitivism/civilization - the pre-Euro-Arab Africa - while the richly decorated dashiki, the fez and the turban which form a part of Saif ben Isaac al-Heit's royal robes evoke Africa's Arabo-Moorish connections. The novel sustains the hybrid characteristic of the Moorish influence on the growth of African heritage - a racial blend of negro-Africans and Arabs - by dressing the Saif in '*Moorish boots with hippopotamus hide soles*'. What we have here is an amalgamated product which comes into being through the exploitation of the Moorish production mode and negro-African material. It is not surprising that the Saif's crown should be fashioned from African gold and Persian/Arabian pearls - demystifying the role of the Arabs in the establishment and control of the Saif dynasty. The European facet of Nakem's heritage is epitomized by the '*two gleaming muskets*', '*two masters-at-arms*' and '*a silver mace fastened with*

lion hide, the emblem of royalty', denoting the syncretized neo-African culture engendered by the European colonization of Africa. This is the novel's oblique way of suggesting that there is no pure African heritage awaiting racial retrieval because Africa's contacts with alien civilizations have created a hybrid civilization. This is one of the work's most cogent arguments dismissing the notion of Africa's Golden Age.

The novel's narrative structure further reaffirms this vision, though with a different emphasis. There is a veiled intimation that the evolution of Africa's heritage has become, basically, the process of its own inherent weaknesses and the weaknesses of the alien cultures it has had contacts with through the passage of history. A classic illustration of this cultural and historical hybridization is woven into a narrative fabric depicting the struggle for supremacy between the Saif and the French Governor who sets in motion a plan to assassinate the evil emperor. Unfortunately for the governor, the Saif, who sees and hears all because of his countless spies, discovers the plot and unleashes his own counter-operation to silence the wayward colonial administrator once and for all. The Saif's sexual bait is a courtesan of unparalleled beauty, Awa (Eve). Awa, who looks like a Tuareg woman, speaks French and is dressed in clothes and jewellery denoting a mixed origin, evokes this eclectic patterning of Ouologuem's narrative:

> The moment he saw her, the administrator was beguiled by her freshness, by the velvet of her skin, which was ember-coloured like that of the Berber nomads. Her eyes had the soft glow of fireflies, her hair was silky, and she had the fine nose of a Tuareg woman. She was dressed in flowered satin in the Egyptian style, with earrings, a necklace of fat pearls, and gold bracelets set with rubies.
>
> Her tresses were of watered silk, her eyes were glowing coals, and in stature and bearing she was unrivalled. (p.54)

Awa is presented biologically and culturally as a blend of alien and African civilizations. The veiled and unwholesome racial evolution of the continent of Africa which *Bound to Violence* is stealthily straining to convey here is lucidly articulated by Lemuel Johnson in his unique work, *The Devil, The Gargoyle, and*

The Buffoon: The Negro as Metaphor in Western Literature (1969). Awa is (to borrow from Johnson) 'in this historical and "ethnological" sense ... the pathogenic product created by unintelligent contacts between' negro-African tribes and Asiatic Caucasians. Thus 'The resulting union,' Johnson sums up, 'may be manifested primarily in the creation of a hybrid or generally mongrelized culture, or it may be in actual biological miscegenation' (1969:3). The biological Awa, her history and culture are polyglots. What this narrative projects is what, for want of better terminology, we could define as the parasitic feature of the evolution of African civilization and, indeed, of all civilizations. This tendency to assimilate and be assimilated in return confirms the view that there is no pristine African heritage waiting for retrieval, and by projection, no pure African history.

Another classic substantiation of the above view is the novel's description of the French Governor Chevalier's official residence:

> ... in each room there arose, like sentinels at attention: white panels, paintings on glass, cream-coloured walls, pale jade-green ceilings ....
> ... a svelte Louis XVI drawing room, here and there in apparent disorder, attenuating its severity, a rich Persian rug and various objects collected in Indochina and North Africa; in the dining room a Louis XVI silver cabinet and buffet, an alabaster vase, an opaline Buddha, and an Arabian tea set. (p.54)

The interior decor of the house confirms that French culture is itself a blend of components of alien heritage for even France, the epitome of Western civilization, has assimilated from other cultural sources while its own heritage is absorbed by alien cultures in return. The African element of French civilization is revealed by the bedroom's furnishing: 'the gilt moldings, the zebra skins and paintings on the walls'.

The intended meaning of the African connection is exposed by the text's evocation of the barbaric and the exotic: 'The air smelled of wild beast and incense; at their feet a panther skin' (p.56).

The sense of bestiality and perverted religiosity which breathes through Ouologuem's Nakem is again evoked. The novel's most repulsive portrayal of Africa's sexual eroticism is epitomized by Awa's willing submission to the bizarre sexual antics of the French governor, Chevalier, aided by his two dogs, Medor and Dick. The novel highlights the sexual beast in man as follows:

> Maddened by these feverish nibblings, she [Awa] licked Chevalier's perfumed tongue, struggled and cried out. Calling off the dogs, the man ploughed the woman like a fallow field, like an ocean smitten by the prow of a ship. And he heard her gasping under the emotion of this sin ....
>
> A slap from him made her bark, she coiled up with pleasure, panting under his cruel caress, manipulating him like a queen or a skilful whore. Her mouth was still hungry for this man's pink, plump mollusc, and the tongue in her mouth itched to suck at the pearl of sumptuous orient that flowed, foaming as though regretfully ....
>
> A flowing cup--Awa--*a lavish board! An Eve with frantic loins, she cajoled the man, kissed him, bit him, scratched him, whipped him, sucked his nose ears throat, armpits navel and member so voluptuously that the administrator ... kept her there day after day* .... (p.57, my emphasis)

Awa (Eve), the beautiful African courtesan, well-trained in sexual eroticism, is portrayed as 'a queen or a skilful whore' (p.57). Her insatiable sexual desire and willingness to learn alien sexual perversions amounts to the text's condemnation of not only Africa's ruling elite's conversion of women into sexual weapons, which could be manipulated for political advantage, but also the female victims' docile submission to sexual abuse and depersonalization. Also generated by this event is the perception that Awa is a crude mirror-image of the European tradition of using beautiful women in espionage and secret national operations and assassinations. The narrative unleashes another insight: that there is an elusive but nagging intimation which calls attention to Awa's undisguised erotic bliss and expert handling of the French Governor in bed. Awa's role in this episode projects her as a symbolic character representing a variety of female motifs ranging from Mother Africa to the prostituted modern African woman, bastardised and dressed up like an Arabian belly-dancer to lure men to their doom like the mythical Eve. Equally fascinating is the fact that Awa's whore-like erotic display anticipates the prostitution circuit of Tambira's daughter,

Kadidia, which is dealt with at the end of this chapter. The narrative also intimates that the wild sexual eroticism of primeval Africa is transformed by European civilization into a sexual depravity that is more grotesque (as exemplified by governor Chevalier's two dogs which prepare Awa for copulation) than that of the primitive dark continent. The novel then links Chevalier's sexual craving for the exotic African courtesan to the pleasures of ancient Greece and Rome: 'To sleep with a black woman is the pleasure of kings and gods of Olympus. It is the greatest of all pleasures, the unavowable delight' (p.56). Chevalier's comment also subtly juxtaposes pagan Africa with pagan Greece and Rome, suggesting that paganism could be a historical condition and not a racial one. The European image of the African woman as an exotic sex object is confirmed by the French soldiers' selection of ten captured women for their sexual pleasure: 'And each white man chooses for himself more than ten black women' (p.27). The novel extends the European sexual craving for the mythical exotic black women even to the Roman Catholic Bishop de Saignac, whose many crimes include getting 'three black women with child' (p.78). Thus the postulation that the novel, obliquely, targets, the Western world in its pervasive repudiation of human history and civilization is validated. The text's fundamental target, however, remains unchanged.

The novel intensifies its attack on the ruling elites of Africa by exposing the Machiavellian villainy of the Saif ruling caste. The climax of this evil rule is best revealed by the manner in which Saif ben Isaac al-Heit uses organized violence and cruelty to achieve absolute political and spiritual power in Nakem, despite his military defeat by the French colonial power. This battle of guile and wit between Saif ben Isaac al-Heit and the French colonizers and its aftermath constitute the novel's most heinous condemnation of Africa. To elaborate upon what has already been hinted at, we are told that Governor Chevalier had earlier discovered the secret of the Saif's covert assassination of political enemies using trained poisonous snakes and had succeeded in coercing the sorcerer, Bouremi, to become his snake-

trainer because he wanted to use snakes in his own plot to destroy Saif ben Isaac el-Heit, his political enemy. But the Saif discovered the plot and sent Awa to lure Chevalier for assassination.

The arrival of Saif ben Isaac al-Heit at the governor's residence on his mission of eliminating Chevalier, who also has elaborately set the stage for Saif's assassination with snake poison slipped into liquor, and the text's first physical description of the devilish epic villain-hero, is crucial to our understanding of the novel's thrust:

> There was dignity and strength in Saif's long, slow strides. Smiling, he caressed the cutlass under his dashiki and, soothed by a light breeze from the plains, sponged his square forehead beneath his graying short-cropped hair--the forehead of a warrior far more than of a religious leader. A few steps from the threshold, he removed his head covering with somewhat theatrical gesture, revealing an aristocratic, dissolute, and handsome face and the bald crown of his head--a sign of weariness or of early debauchery. His thick lips, his aquiline nose, indeed his every feature smacked unmistakably of vice....
>
> Holding his enturbaned fez under his arm, he salaamed. A rare object--of massive gold--gleamed in his buttonhole. (pp.58-59)

The novel reinforces the fiendish nature of Saif by representing him as a ruthless assassin who smiles as he caresses his weapon of murder, evoking more an image of a ferocious assassin than that of the pious emperor he claims to be. This portrayal of the evil nature of the African ruling elite is intensified by the narrator's assertion that his degenerate physique exposes his sexual immorality while negroid features query his claim to Jewish ancestry. His body, gaudily decked in gold jewellery, confirms the ostentatious life of the ancient rulers - an addiction which feeds their determination to continue living the royal parasitic life. The satanic and painful way in which the French governor is disposed of re-enacts the fact that Saif ben Isaac al-Heit is a worthy descendant of Saif al-Haram, the demonic son of the Black Messianic progenitor. By initiating a diversion leading to his knocking off the lamp, the demonic emperor throws snake poison into the eyes of Chevalier, who dies

instantly without even a groan. When a new lamp is brought into the room, the governor's right eye is wide open, exposing a gory cavity. On the floor beside the dead French governor 'his eyeball, round and purple, a bloody pear, lay spitted on the tip of a table knife' (p.64). The villain incarnate is also found lying on the floor. The author of this satanic assassination is not dead, but only feigning to be fast asleep and displying a large simulated dagger rent at the back of his dashiki. The narrator describes the sleep as 'the hypocritical sleep of an assassin' (p.64). The poor innocent orderly, who had served the dinner, is accused of the murder and attempts to run away, but 'a sentry shot him down like a dog. He had paid for his crime' (p.64). The novel ironically intimates that the orderly's crime is that of being born a member of 'the niggertrash'. For this perfect crime, Saif ironically receives 'an official citation for distinguished service' to France. The medallion that the evil assassin receives for disposing of Chevalier is appropriately entitled the 'chevalier of the Legion of Honor' (p. 65).

The second powerful European challenge to Saif's supremacy comes from the Catholic Church, symbolized by Bishop Thomas de Saignac, whose addiction to pomp and material wealth is no different from that of the debauched Saif:

> ... when Bishop Thomas de Saignac disembarked in Nakem, Saif, the governor, and the entire population welcomed him amid indescribable joy .... So magnificent was his dress that they thought him a saint sent by God and showered him with gifts--lambs, kids, chickens, partridges, fish--in such abundance that he did not know what to do with them and, like it or not, had to leave them to the poor. Thus the new Christians showed their great zeal and obedience. (p.44)

There is a subtle suggestion that the Bishop's ornate garb also poses a threat to Saif ben Isaac al-Heit, who wants to be the sole symbol of magnificence and the proprietor of Nakem's secular and spiritual power. The neo-traditional griot's meticulous portrait of Bishop Thomas de Saignac, whose priestly robe is 'so magnificent' that the niggertrash 'thought him a saint sent by God and showered on him gifts ...' (p.44) highlights the novel's

central concern - a commentary on the tendency of the suffering masses in Africa to revere anything clothed in pomp and the supernatural. That the naive crowd bases its perception of the Bishop's saintliness on his gaudy external appearance confirms the novel's condemnation of the people's seduction by the superficial, the flamboyant and the supernatural.

To deflate the Bishop's spiritual authority and pomp, Saif compiles a thick dossier which is expertly crafted and couched in legal jargon to reveal all the scandalous details of Bishop Thomas de Saignac's machinations against 'His Royal Magnificence', 'the most-mighty and the most pious' Saif ben Isaac al-Heit. One of the Bishop's crimes exposes the immoral duplicity of the Church, and demands a full citation:

> ... Bishop de Saignac had the audacity to do what certain white traders had advised: to seize all the idols belonging to the converts and order a solemn rite. But only the more recent and inexpensive of these masks-idols were burned. And certain soldiers ... were surprised on their return to France to see that those same masks, those same idols, far from having been burned as Bishop de Saignac alleged, had been sold at exorbitant prices to antique dealers, collectors, museums, and shops. The profits went to the Church .... (pp.76-78)

The victory of the master of guile over the French Bishop is conveyed by the following: 'it became known that Bishop de Saignac had left the country, that Saif had been granted a monthly subsidy in addition to a private gift from Monsieur and Madame Vandame' (p.80). The epic villain, the novel maintains, is so good in covert destruction of his opponents that he is rewarded by his naive political adversaries for subverting their power base. Subsequently, when Wampoulo and Kratonga (Saif's murderous agents) pick up Chevalier's successor, Governor Vandame, submit him to grotesque, and sadistic, torture and finally kill him, all opposition to the Saif's power is shattered, leaving the Empire of Nakem completely under the control of the Black colonizer, Saif ben Isaac al-Heit. The agent's insolent retort to the French governor unveils the zenith of Saif's monumental glory:

> Kratonga with a forced smile: "His Royal Magnificence reigns here below as the Lord All-Powerful. His edicts are inscribed in heaven. Woe to anyone who disobeys them: one fine morning he wakes up recalled to the Most-High."
>
> Vandame was surprised to find that Saif's agents spoke French very well. Saif himself, he was soon to learn, expressed himself excellently in that language. (p.111)

The institution of organized violence and cruelty, the novel maintains, is brutally effective. That the ancient emperors have perfected 'primitive' methods of torture to compel obedience from all living creatures is confirmed by the way Saif's agents break the French governor. After having been terrorized into licking 'the horned triangular head' of Dafa, a viper, demonically trained for secret political assassinations, the once powerful and pompous governor, quickly becomes very polite, sirring his assassins all the way. We are told that as the terrified governor licks the head of the poisonous snake before the gruesome assassination 'with her forked tongue Dafa marked his face with sticky flashes' (p.114).

The organized political violence which dominates Ouologuem's work is compounded by an economic violence which is equally debilitating. The horror of the Middle Passage and Africa's central role are evoked by the Chief of Gagol-Gosso's advice to the European soldiers who arrive in his village with thousands of captured slaves: '"Sell them". They sold them.' (p.27). The novel contends that slave trade and tribal warfare are linked together: 'To maintain this ostentation and satisfy his craving for glory and new lands, Saif [al-Haram], thanks to the complicity of the southern chiefs, extended the slave trade, which he blessed like the blood-thirsty hypocrite he was' (p.11). The indictment of the hereditary caste's role in the slave trade is epitomized by Saif ben Isaac al-Heit's son, Prince Madoubo, who is said to have phenomenal strength, measured in terms of how soon he could cleave a slave into two. We are told that Prince Madoubo is '"a man so strong that with a single stroke of his sword he could split a slave in two or sever the head of a bull"' (p.45). Like *Two Thousand Seasons, Bound to Violence* traces the

sustenance of the slave trade to the African traditional rulers' craving for the life of overindulgence and splendour.

The advent of the Arabs in Africa intensifies the trade in humans. The living hell of the Trans-Saharan slave trade is indescribable:

> ... a caravan traversed those dismal and endless plains: slave traders driving wretched files of men, women, and children, covered with open sores, choked in iron collars, their wrists shackled and bleeding. (p.28)

The monumental role of the Arab in the slave trade, whose pernicious aftermath both Armah and Ouologuem maintain has been grossly underestimated by its victims, is reconfirmed as follows:

> Amidst all this dissolute life with its general bastardization, its vice and corruption, the Arab conquest, which had come several centuries earlier, *settled over the land like a she-dog baring her white fangs in raucous laughter: more and more often, unfree slaves and subjugated tribes were herded off to Mecca, Egypt, Ethiopia, the Red Sea, and America at prices as ridiculous as the flea-bitten dignity of the niggertrash.*
>
> ... And ... these far-flung commercial operations were masked by an apparent pursuit of spiritual values: Arab universities ... were established in Tillaberi-Bentia ... closely connected with the world of international commerce and the eastern slave trade. (p.18, my emphasis)

Bound to Violence contends that the different phases of Africa's history are driven by the same fundamental goal: a craving for the absolute domination and exploitation of the masses. The rapacity of the Arab slave traders as represented in *Bound to Violence* appears to reaffirm Armah's thrust in *Two Thousand Seasons*. The niggertrash's hope that the Europeans will save them from the Saif's organized slave trade is savagely shattered. The arrival of the Europeans and Christianity neither ends the slave trade nor the despotism institutionalised by the Saifs and the notables. The novel's demonic anger projects a permanent servitude for the nameless suffering people. The narrator's ironic stance is shown by his intimation of the people's blindness and illusion. It is declared that 'Saved from slavery, the niggertrash welcomed the white man with joy, hoping he would make them forget the mighty Saif's meticulously organized

cruelty' (p.31). The work's perception of what the European advent will bring is revealed in a heinous incident in which a pregnant slave woman is induced by ruthless French invading soldiers to give birth while marching:

> A woman found squatting. Big with child. They push her, prod her with their knees. She gives birth standing up, marching. The umbilical cord is cut, the child kicked off the road and the column marches on, heedless of the delirious whimpering mother, who, limping and staggering, finally falls a hundred yards farther on and is crushed by the crowd. (p.27).

The work intimates that greed for power and wealth generates uncontrollable violence. Europe's entry into the fray, the novel implies, will only compound the violence, and not alleviate it. The advent of Europeans, increases the volume of the slave trade instead of ending it:

> Amidst the diabolical jubilation of priest and merchant, of family circles and public organs, niggers, who unlike God have arms but no soul, were clubbed, sold, stockpiled, haggled over, adjudicated, flogged, bound and delivered ... to the Portuguese, the Spaniards, the Arabs ... and to the French, Dutch, and English ... and so scattered to the winds. (pp.11-12)

The demonic cruelty of the trade in humans and its attendant wholesale displacement of entire communities is substantiated by the sheer volume of the slaves sold and the untold suffering they are subjected to:

> A hundred million of the damned - *so moaned the troubadours of Nakem* when the evening vomits forth its starry diamonds - were carried away. Bound in bundles of six, shorn of all human dignity, *they were flung into the Christian incognito of ships' holds*, where no light could reach them. ... A single hour in that pestilential hole, in that orgy of fever, starvation, vermin, beriberi, scurvy, suffocation, and misery, would have left no man unscathed. *Thirty percent died en route*. ... slaves who were as sick as a goat in labour were thrown to the sharks. Newborn babes incurred the same fate: they were thrown overboard as surplus. ... Half naked and utterly bewildered, the niggertrash, young as the new moon, were crowded into open pens and auctioned off. There *they lay beneath the eyes of the all-powerful (and just) God*, a human tide, a black mass of putrid flesh, a spectacle of ebbing life and nameless suffering. (p.12, my emphasis)

In his usual cynical and insolent tone, the narrator ridicules the belief in the kindness of God and tosses a sneer at the British claim to humanism and moral integrity. The novel scoffs at how exploiters 'like the fiery-eyed English pirate Hawkins, made their profits' from the slave trade 'and were knighted by the hand of a queen, Queen Elizabeth among others ....' Then comes the jeer: 'God save the Queen!' (p.13).

Violence, which is orchestrated for economic gains, reaches its climax when Saif ben Isaac al-Heit and his slave agents like the Sudanese Doumbouya, a wealthy slave trader with the face of a horse, "an authority on the secret slave traffic" and the Frenchman, Jean-Luc Dalbard, establish a covert slave trade in which people are captured, drugged with *dabali* (dagga), buried in the night, and later sold in a state of transition between the world of the dead and that of the living. Slavery at its most demonic level is practised when the majority of the victims are turned into zombies before they are sold. It is during this stage that Saif ben Isaac al-Heit sells his servants, including Tambira's husband, Kassoumi, to his French slave agent, Jean-Luc Dalbard. The traumatized Kadidia follows her father. Kadidia later relates the horrifying details of the new slave trade to her brother, Raymond-Spartacus, in Paris, where her whoring for survival has taken her. According to Kadidia, the Frenchman, Jean-Luc Dalbard, 'was supplied with *dabali* by Saif ...' which he mixes with the workers' food. Through the use of *dabali*, the notables organize phoney pilgrimages in which the niggertrash are sold in Arabia. The circuit of slavery is endless. In their drugged state, 'They'd been sold and resold' (p.146). The slaves are reduced to zombies by being conditioned with drugs so that they work only for sex and drugs - an evil practice described as 'voluntary labour' by the ruling elite.

The novel's physical description of 'the niggertrash' in colonial Africa during World War I constitutes its most damaging repudiation of Africa's rulers - pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial - which is visually projected as follows:

> Pouring in from the outskirts amidst stray sheep *with amulets*, amidst dizzily striped cotton prints offering their naive designs ... palm trees, portraits of Saif, masks, rhinoceroses, ships ... a throng of men, women, and children, red-eyed noseless lepers, yellow-spotted lepers covered with scabs and pus, who stretched out their black fingerless, pink-splotched hands to Henry. Some held out meagre scrapings of food in earthenware pots also used for feeding ducks; they were sufferers of smallpox chewing dabali, lips swollen from the drug ... enormous thick-lipped black women with amber rings in their ears, a noble melancholy in their faces, and no other covering than the tattered loincloths muttered that they were sick with syphilis; others flung themselves slavering at Henry's feet, screaming that they had been bewitched by sorcerers or threatened with death from a distance; consumptives coughed blandishments at Henry, tried to speak, spat blood ...
>
> He [Henry] obtained food and clothing, dressed the ragged and fed the starving. He washed the feet of the disinherited folk, whose skin, covered with scaly pustules, was colder than a snake and as rough as a file. (p.122)

The niggertrash's material destitution, compounded by natural and social diseases imported from Europe, and further intensified by violent exploitation of indigenous and alien rulers, has turned them into human trash. Henry, the humpbacked French priest, who has become a saint, is the only one who cares. Through a carefully-selected detailed description of this diseased and poverty-stricken rabble - 'a throng of men, women, and children, red-eyed noseless lepers, yellow-spotted lepers covered with scabs and pus, who stretched out their black fingerless, pink-splotched hands, - *Bound to Violence* shows, with superb visual clarity, why the text labels the people 'the niggertrash'. By lacing the narrative with apt details - 'amulets', 'syphilis', 'dabali', and 'bewitched by sorcerers or threatened with death from a distance' - the novel suggests that the wretchedness of nameless suffering masses is Africa's real Golden Age - the only genuine achievement of its pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial rulers. The marching of the disinherited folk of Nakem to the Roman Catholic priest, while heavily mantled in amulets and talismans, shows the niggertrash's unwillingness to abandon their old ways. The occult arts and the new Christian faith, as symbolized by Bishop Henry, are treated equally. The power and the realism of Ouologuem's repudiation, no matter how

exaggerated it is, is the fact that each item which this novel magnifies many times over can be traced to either ethnohistorical or contemporary Africa. It is the text's ingenious selection of historical and existential realities of Africa and its overblowing and transformation of these into fictional realism which makes this novel the most devastating condemnation of Africa. The ring of truth which is projected by the internal dynamics of the novel cannot be easily dismissed.

The theme of the abuse of women in traditional Africa, which permeates the five novels under scrutiny, is elaborately treated in *Bound to Violence*. The shabby treatment of women in Nakem stems from the sexual perversity of the debauched and immoral Saifs, who custom-design decrees which enable them to treat women as sex objects and playthings in order to overindulge their demonic carnal desires. The tradition that a wife or a woman is a thing to be taken is projected right from the beginning of the novel when the accursed son of the saintly Saif Isaac al-Heit, Saif al-Haram, declares through his action that wives are nothing but pieces of the husband's property to be owned and inherited by the son upon the death of his father. Saif al-Haram's seizure of and forced marriage to his father's four wives, including his own mother, sustains this vision. That His Royal Magnificence, Saif ben Isaac al-Heit, has an unknown number of beautiful women in his harem, and the fact that his favourites among these are young and beautiful, confirms the interpretation that the rulers have deliberately designed marital customs to ensure the subservience and total control of women by men. The tradition - obviously created by the god-like rulers of medieval Africa and still practised in modern Africa - which allows the ruler to select the most beautiful girls in the community and keep them in his harem as concubines, appears to be the source of the second class status foisted on women by traditional Africa. This explains the fact that 'Saif's twenty-seven favorite wives' are 'all young and exquisite' (p.32).

The novel's exposition of the subservience of women in medieval Africa is, perhaps, one of its most devastating repudiations of Africa. *Bound to Violence* represents how men, obsessed with their own false sense of importance reduce women to the level of sex objects which can be owned, discarded or destroyed at will. In a world strangulated by a meticulously organized slavery and political violence, women, who have always been shabbily treated by the chauvinist male-dominated continent, naturally occupy the lowest social rung. This view is unambiguously confirmed by the imperial decree on female adultery. The reader is told that traditionally women who are found guilty of committing adultery are shackled and douched with pepper. This punishment is now intensified with the use of ants. The picture becomes bizarre. Special treatment is reserved for pregnant women found guilty of infidelity. If the guilty woman happens to be pregnant and gives birth to a still-born child she 'was held with spread legs over a wood fire which singed her pubic hair' (p.49). The custom of punishing women who commit adultery while men can marry five women and have a limitless number of mistresses exposes one of the rotten injustices which feed this mucky world. The narrator tells us that the only recourse open to the woman is to find her rival and beat her up. *Bound to Violence* defies all Africa's moral taboos and embodies within its textuality the gothic and the heretical.

The novel's most corrosive castigation of the moral hypocrisy of the god-like rulers of Africa, past and present, is the enactment of a new customary law by Saif, who is determined to win all the notables over and is also goaded by the desire to perpetuate his own sadistic sexual antics. The new law requires the sewing up of the vagina -'infibulation' - coupled with female circumcision:

> Saif had meanwhile won the favor of notables and servants alike, and even of the *tirailleurs* and the interpreters in the service of the French, by proclaiming a new customary law which made woman irrevocably a man's thing and instrument. To prevent women from being unfaithful to their fiances, the practice of infibulation (the sewing up of the vagina)--hitherto a rarity--was made the rule; and lest a woman once married should avenge herself by infidelity, her clitoris was removed.

(48-49)

The stench of this customary law is exposed by the double standards entrenched by the rule of the Saifs. The custom submits unfaithful women to degrading humiliations while allowing men the freedom to indulge in infidelity with impunity.

The male chauvinist imposition that women should remain subservient and conduct themselves as mere playthings to be enjoyed by men is extended to Europeans as well. The French Governor, Chevalier's arrangement with the interpreter and the local chief to ensure his constant supply of women for his sexual pleasure confirms this view. It is revealed that 'Twice each week the administrator enlisted the services of his interpreter or the village chief of Krebbi-Katsena to deliver a companion of his lusts to his door' (p.53). To achieve supreme power, Saif ben Isaac el-Heit, aided by the Chief of Krebbi-Katsena, turns a noble lady, Awa, who is a widower engaged to Sankolo, into a sex tool for espionage and political murder. She is sent as a decoy for the assassination of the French Governor (see pp.204-206). This incident reveals that the servility of women in traditional Africa operates across social barriers. The gratuitous murder of Awa by her fiance, Sankolo, for the flimsy reason that she discovers him in a rather sordid situation is illuminating. Awa catches her noble fiance masturbating as he watches Saif's son, Prince Madoubo, fornicating with Sonia, the daughter of the German art collector, Shrobenius. Furious at being caught with his pantaloons down, the Saif's sadistic agent, Sankolo, subjects his own woman to bizarre torture and brutal death.

> He hit the back of her head, pressed muck into her mouth, and went on striking ... Sankolo seized Awa by the throat. His knife whirled, twice he planted it her left breast, slitted her belly from top to bottom. Suddenly expelled, her pink viscera crackled. He didn't even know whether the woman had screamed. *He licked the blade*, put the knife away in his belt. Covered the corpse with a wall of mud. (pp.92-93, my emphasis)

Traditional Africa's low opinion of womanhood is potently conveyed by this senseless murder of the ravishingly beautiful

Awa by her own noble fiance. The demonic savagery and the sadism generated by this gratuitous killing and how Saif ben Isaac al-Heit uses the scandal arising from it to increase the prices on art works exposes the degree of moral rot which plagues the Nakem Empire. This use of someone's violent act to achieve economic and financial benefit is another powerful indictment of Africa - a world that is addicted to crass materialism, requiring the conversion of all human acts into material gains. This economic violence resonates throughout the colonial wars of plunder and capture of slaves for sale. The novel suggests that there is another element which has been introduced by the colonizers. The reader is told that Awa sees another 'magnificent black woman in the house across the way, naked at her mirror, brushing her hair: an enormous double bed awaited her customers' (p.55). Surely, she is not a slave woman. The novel suggests rather cunningly that Captain Vandame (who later becomes the French Governor after the assassination of Governor Chevalier) has become a pimp and the beautiful black woman has been turned into a hooker servicing a succession of men. It must be reiterated that the human indignity suffered by Awa as result of her having to submit to the bizarre sexual antics of the French Governor, Chevalier, whose dogs, Dick and Medor abuse her sexually, projects the view that it is not only the traditional African who treats women shabbily (p.55-57). In *Bound to Violence*, African rulers are perceived as egomaniacs whose addiction to the desire to dominate becomes so pervasive that it assumes bizarre forms. This is substantiated by Saif's symbolic rape of Captain Vandame's wife, just before the diabolical emperor commits his first perfect crime. To proclaim his proprietorship over all living creatures in his Empire, Saif ben Isaac al-Heit, using his foot 'which he had manoeuvred adroitly', caresses Madame Vandame's foot. The narrator points out that 'nothing was said, but vaguely troubled by his sense of her emotion, he looked at her tenderly, intently, inquiringly, for in that moment he knew that he was slowly, forcefully, serenely raping her' (p.61). This is a classic example of the rottenness of a world in which the sexual potency of the ruling elite is represented as a political index crucial to its

achievement of supreme political power. This craving for absolute power, ironically, projects only their hollowness.

The novel's disfigurement of traditional Africa, unequivocally, magnified by its portrayal of the rotten way in which women are treated in pre-colonial Africa, is sustained by its detailed manipulation of Tambira's rites of passage and the cycle of sexual brutality she is subjected to. The novel juxtaposes the two worlds within the larger cosmology of the novel: the naive, agonized but ethical milieu of the slaves and the serfs and the murky world of the Saifs and the notables. In this world of serfdom, Tambira's life begins with love which promises a heaven on earth for the simple-minded, beautiful slave woman. This romanticized dream, however, ends in a nightmare. Ouologuem's superb lyrical delineation of the love between Kassoumi and Tambira invokes, despite the eroticism aroused, the celestial purity of man in his natural perfection and the spontaneity of human love - the kind of human attributes now dead in a world encapsulated in perpetual violence, servitude and moral decay:

> The leaves murmured as a light breeze brushed over them; naked in the tall grass, they mingled their sighs in consent. Transfigured and half delirious, conscious of nothing but their possession of each other, of their profound penetration, they lay enlaced, saturated with mingling of their bodies, the drunkenness of their movements, raving, panting, tense from head to foot with passionate expectation. The woman carried the man as the sea carries a ship, with a light rocking motion, which rises and falls, barely suggesting the violence below. The man groaned ... The venom spurted; and they felt suffocated, on the point of explosion or death--an instance of intolerable joy, chaste and wanton--terrifying. (pp.42-43)

If we compare this love-making with the savage copulation revealed by both the secret society of sorceresses and sorcerers and the Chevalier-Awa's display of perversion, the deeper vision of Ouologuem's project becomes clear. Ouologuem's thesis is that the debasement of this world is so pervasive that every thread of the societal tapestry is tainted. The phrases like 'the violence below'; the 'raving'; 'the venom'; 'suffocated, on point of explosion or death'; 'an instance of intolerable joy, chaste

and wanton--terrifying'; are verbally woven to generate the intensity of this fresh and unpolluted love. But beneath the surface manifestations of these words lurks a subtle, pregnant insight - a vision that insinuates that all human actions, both evil and good, moral and immoral, divine and profane, generate violence which could degenerate into a holocaust. Thus, the Messianic hero, Saif Isaac al-Heit, begets both evil and saintly sons, and the evil son, al-Haram, takes over the Saif dynasty, transforming it into something utterly satanic. Unlike the saintly model epic hero, Saif Isaac al-Heit, whose descendants are tainted by his own seed, the fresh and chaste love of Tambira and Kassoumi is fouled by the rotten society they live in and by the evil genius, Saif ben Isaac al-Heit, the demi-god.

The moral pollution is ingeniously introduced as a customary law which demands that the lovers can only get married if their supreme Lord and Master is allowed to test the bride's virginity on the night of the wedding, since this is the first marriage among the servants - "the right of the first night". This interpretation is unequivocally endorsed by Saif's new customary decree of having the right to rape Tambira on the night of her marriage to Kassoumi. The outcome of this new decree is that the sexually-insatiable and depraved notables are able to ritually rape hundreds of slave girls by allowing them to get married and then exercising their rights of first night in accordance with Saif ben Isaac al-Heit's new marriage decree!

The novel's depiction of the ridiculous and repulsive customs Tambira is submitted to reaffirms the thesis that the Saif dynasty pollutes everything. To ensure that an artificial simulation of virginity is projected to fool His Royal Magnificence on the day of his legalized rape of Tambira, the bride has to submit to circumcision and infibulation:

> The matron made Tambira sit with her legs spread on a large mortar that had been rolled into the room. And while the first woman held her motionless, the second with a knife that was none too clean--*ba'al ma yallah*--cut off her clitoris, incised the two lips, rubbed them sore, pinned them together with thorns. Then, making a little opening in

this "seam" (for the needs of nature), she inserted a little hollow stick coated with browned butter. (p.48)

The agony of African womanhood is initiated by Tambira, the slave girl. The severing of her clitoris with 'a knife that was none too clean' and the sewing of her vagina with thorns, leaving a small hole 'for the needs of nature' is nothing compared with her horrific death and the equally cruel fate of her daughter, Kadidia, her husband, Kassoumi, and her sons. The novel's depiction of the Tambira-Kassoumi marriage and the rituals governing matrimony in Nakem pushes its denigration of traditional Africa to an unprecedented depth. To amplify the barbarity of Nakem Empire and the servile role imposed upon women, the narrator sketches in detail, the absurd ritual oddities Kassoumi has to subject Tambira and himself to in order to fulfil the requirements of the marital customs of the Nakem Empire. The entire relevant extract is cited for explication:

> As custom decrees, the slave Kassoumi resorted to magic to secure Tambira's love. Providing himself with a salamander, a cockroach, and an old piece of cloth that Tambira had used to wipe her loins with in the days of their amours, he dried them, ground them up, and mixed them into the titbits he was to serve his wife after Saif had exercised his right. Then, following the counsels of the old people, he burned nail parings, three eye-lashes, seven head hairs, and seven of his pubic hairs, and seasoned the ashes with red pepper: these too he sprinkled on the bride's nuptial viands. To guarantee his own vigor during the seven days of the marriage feast, he crushed three lion penises, the dried sperm of a he-goat, and three cock's testicles into a powder which he mixed with yams and ate with a red source.
>
> On the night of this first Friday in March 1902 (the religious ceremony had been performed in the morning by the appointed chiefs), as incense, sublimate of camphor, aloes, Indian musk, and amber were burned in the antechambers, as the women among the guests tinted their hands with henna and their faces with saffron, as the drums, flutes, fifes, cymbals, dulcimers, and xylophones resound as on the great feast days, Tambira comforted, bathed, and perfumed, received the visit of the matron who examined her to make sure the stitches were still in place. An hour later Saif, regal magnificence whose every step was said to be an instant of bliss, blasted the barrier of stitches which, luckily for Tambira, had rotted.
>
> To Saif's consternation she showed no pain, but then a trick filled him with delight: the bride, who had slipped a little sack of sheep's blood under her buttocks,

> contrived to wince; the blood splattered and the sadistic Saif thought he had brought it forth from her entrails. In token of his prowess, the matron displayed a bloody cloth to the guests, and three cannon salutes, barking into the night, were greeted by songs, cries, roars, and dances of the crowd: oye, gouzi-gouzi! (pp.49-50)

The nauseating concoction Kassoumi blends for Tambira's food underpins the meaninglessness of the marriage rituals fabricated by the ruling elite. The normal reaction of African readers to this ingenious parody of traditional Africa's occult arts and rituals is likely to be one of outrage at the novel's bizarre distortion of African traditions. This is, however, an act of parody. The uncanny genius of Ouologuem's style is that it does not exploit fictive ideas specially invented for textual manipulation but gives an overblown aggregation of existing cabalistic and cultural realities of contemporary Africa. Thus, any unbiased African reader is likely to realize that the novel's distortion amounts to a monstrous blow-out version of existing realities of Africa. In Islamic Africa, marabouts make their living from sales of talismans and all kinds of repulsive aphrodisiacs designed to maximize sexual potency, fertility, and material wealth. *Bound to Violence*'s distortion is grounded on Africa's existential reality.

The religious ceremony performed by selected chiefs, the fountainheads of negro-African culture and racial purity, is irreconcilable with the native traditions of Africa. This interpretation is endorsed by some of the materials used for the purported traditional marriage ritual: 'incense, sublimate of camphor, aloes, Indian musk, and amber were burned in the antechambers' (p.50). What we have here is a synthesized pseudo-magico-spiritual ritual which has elements of African occult arts, Indian mysticism and Islamic religious mystification. The novel intimates that this is what rituals and traditions have degenerated into in Islamized Africa.

Then comes the climax of the first marriage ceremony among serfs. The guests and the readers are expecting the bride and the

bridegroom to be the central attraction. But this is not to be. The religious ceremony depicted above is devoted to one aim: the grand slam - the ritualized and legalized raping of the bride by His Royal Magnificence, Saif ben Isaac al-Heit. This marriage ceremony evokes the mock-heroic - the subterranean ironic mode which pervades the novel. But Tambira's ritualized humiliations are not over yet. The narrator, intent upon debunking the absurdity of traditional Africa's rituals, adds that Kassoumi 'gave her a symbolic slap in the face ... This he did three times' (p.50). Then the reader is told what amounts to an adulterated custom designed to mystify man's craving for sexual overindulgence: 'Late in the night, he consummated the marriage; he would have to perform the act 'many times in the six remaining days," so it was said, "to prevent the wound from closing." The sardonic humour of the narratorial voice is unveiled by 'so it was said' (p.50). The reader is aware that Tambira and Kassoumi, had, previously, made love on a number of occasions.

Tambira's circuitry of sexual violence and abuse, initiated by Emperor Saif ben Isaac al-Heit on her wedding night, continues to its natural conclusion: rape and death. Later in her attempt to ensure that her children pass their final examinations, Tambira, goaded by her addiction to the supernatural, goes to see the 'sorcerer, Dougouli, whose 'snake eyes', 'wagging mule's head' and face are marked by 'religious frenzy'. Tambira has come in contact with Christianity through the Roman Catholic Priest, Henry, who baptises her quintuplets. But like most mothers in Moslem West Africa, where success in life is perceived to be directed by the invisible hands of the supernatural which can be mystically invoked with talismans to aid man's endeavour, she does not seek the Christian God in her hour of need. Being a victim of slave mentality and superstition carefully nurtured by the ruling elite, Tambira compromises her moral integrity by visiting the hut of an ugly sexually-voracious voodoo man, covered in blood stained-amulets. She willingly, though shaken by 'a hideous mixture of fear and revulsion', submits to a rape by the sorcerer. The reader is told 'Then, brimming with anger

but fearing the sorcerer's occult vengeance as much as his black magic, the woman whimpered like a faithful dog, lay down on the ground and undid her lion-cloth' (p.129).

The view that one of the novel's preoccupations is the servile status foisted upon women by traditional Africa is reaffirmed by the incident in which Tambira's sexual brutalization is further taken on by Kratonga and Wampoulo, Saif's trained killers, who were waiting for her. These two have been waiting for an opportunity to pay back Kassoumi for exposing their friend, Sankolo, for killing Awa. By threatening to tell her husband, 'both men took her'. Perhaps it is not surprising that Tambira, who begins her marital life with a rape, is fated to go through a series of rapes, eventually ending up in the serfs' latrine full of maggots. We are told:

> All that day, by scaring her out of her wits, they took her and took her again, as often as they wanted. [Two days later] Tambira's body had been found. In the back yard a latrine ... A rectangular pit full of faeces swarming with caterpillars and worms of every shape and color.
>
> There she lay in a corner fully dressed and set to rights, with worms in her nostrils ... In her right hand Tambira--suicide or murder?--held a cross that Henry had given her and her children's reader .... (p.130)

There is the unequivocal suggestion that in this world, torn between different religious mystifications - the African traditional mystical practices, Islam and Christianity - the victims who are themselves spiritually bankrupt and finally wrecked on the shores of the stinking spiritual dunghill, ruled by god-like tyrants, are the people. Tambira, who goes to consult the Voodoo man who rapes her, ironically ends her life in the serfs' latrine, where her corpse is found clutching a cross given her by the Roman Catholic priest, Father Henry - intimating that neither the traditional world nor the Christian world has the power to save.

Tambira's daughter, Anna-Kadidia, continues from where her mother's cycle of sexual brutalization is terminated with death. Kadidia's sexual slavery becomes grotesque when her brother,

Raymond Spartacus, inadvertently sleeps with her in a sex orgy in a Paris brothel. We are told she is first seduced by a white man, Polin, who is a pharmacist. Later she works as a maid for an old coffee planter who sexually uses her until she becomes pregnant. The European then abandons her. Threatened by starvation, she starts whoring like the other girls and loses her baby. Finally, Kadidia becomes an international hooker, working in all the cities and countries noted for prostitution: '"*I've come a long way too*, I've seen a lot of places! Africa, the ocean, Tangiers, Gibraltar, Toulon, Marseilles, Le Havre, Paris, and here I am"' (p.146). There is a sense of her coming to terms with the role foisted upon her - a self-illumination which is both a resignation and a determination to get on with life, no matter how shabby. Like her mother, Kadidia's life is wrecked by the vortex of sexual violence when a sadistic customer conceals a razor blade in her soap and she inadvertently slits her own throat (p.147). Even Raymond Spartacus, her brother, shows this indomitable zest for survival when he resorts to male prostitution in order to find money for his studies (pp.152-159). The work's deflation of Africa's image is total. Just as the past holds nothing but a fouled memory, the present and the future promise nothing but a re-enactment of past follies.

The novel's statement to the effect that Raymond Spartacus Kassoumi's existential struggles in France and his impressive degrees do not change anything and the perception that he is nothing but a tool to be used by Saif is conveyed symbolically. Bishop Henry debunks the destiny of the ruled on this earth when he talks to Raymond Kassoumi about a Chinese game in which two birds are tied loosely, creating false independence. It is only when the birds try to exercise that freedom - flying away to real freedom - that the illusion is dispelled:

> "The Chinese have a game: the connecting link, they call it. They capture two birds and tie them together. Not too close. The cord is thin, strong, and fairly long. When the birds are released, they take flight, they think they are free and rejoice in the wideness of the sky. But suddenly: crack! The cord is stretched taut. They flutter and whirl in all directions, blood drips from their bruised wings, feathers and fluff fall on the onlookers. The Chinese find

> it subtly amusing, gloriously funny. They hold their sides with laughter. Sometimes the cord gets tangled in a branch or twines around the birds, and they struggle as though caught in a trap, peck at each other's eyes, beaks, and wings, and if Providence doesn't impale them on a branch, one of them dies before the game is over... Or with the other. Both of them. Together. Strangled; blinded.
>
> Mankind is such a bird. We are all victims of the game; separate, but tied together. All of us, without exception." (p.169)

The pious priest, afflicted by a physical deformity, is presented in the novel as the incarnation of god-head. He seems to be the carrier of the ritual pollution of Nakem and is endowed with an enigma which challenges the evil genius, Saif. The allegorized tale which he tells Raymond Kassoumi, who is about to be elected to the French Parliament as Nakem's representative, projects, in a brilliant flash, the destiny of all the people of Nakem and Africa. Simon Simonse echoes this view in his 'African Literature Between Nostalgia and Utopia' when he declares that 'Even though Kassoumi obtained a brilliant Ph.D. degree - hence his epithet "Black Pearl of French civilization"[7] (Simonse, 1982:467, 486) - he cannot disengage himself from the power network of the Saif, and he remains at the ruler's mercy' (Simonse, 1982:467). The contrived marriage of Tambira and Kassoumi, Tambira's discovery in the serfs' latrine, the insanity of Tambira's two sons after they have been tortured for refusing to be tools for the nobility, the sale of Kassoumi into slavery and Kadidia's prostitution and final horrific death - all these mirror the plight of the birds in the sadistic Chinese game. The game of chess which closes this work - a game appropriately played by the symbolic survivors of the African medieval holocaust - eloquently reaffirms the vision projected by the Chinese bird-game.

Through meticulous foregrounding of chess terminology, the novel confirms the view that the masses in Africa, and the world in general, are nothing but dispensable victims to be used by the ruling elites in their endeavour to self-deify and gild themselves with glory. Bishop Henry conveys this to Saif, whom he perceives as '"Machiavelli ... or Judas"' (p.172):

> "Just look: the squares, the pawns lined up like soldiers in the night of Nakem, the two fools [Bishops, in chess], Chevalier and Vandame, two knights, Kratonga and Wampoulo, the two rooks, Kassoumi and Bouremi. Look! The queen. The most powerful of all: she moves in all directions, the others have only one direction. And all that, the whole panoply, is only to save the king's head--your conscience--the immobilized piece. You see? All that! .... To defend the king." (pp.178-179)

The novel's projection of the ruled as 'pawns', 'fools', 'rooks' in the game of chess re-enacts the vision evoked by the Chinese bird-game. The vision evoked here is the endless cycle of brutalities, catastrophes and despotism which strangulates the ruled, turning them into nothing more than human resources to be exploited for the eternal benefit and survival of the rulers -the insatiable parasites. The naive niggertrash's hope that 'the golden age when all the swine [tyrants] will die is just around the corner' is quickly dispelled by the cynical assertion that freedom is 'a false window offering a vista of happiness' (p.174). *Bound to Violence* perceives man's endless search for freedom as an absurd quest because '"politics does not lend itself to honest expression"' (p.176). The metamorphosis of the status of the slaves also reconfirms the illusiveness of genuine freedom. Their movement from naked slavery to a stage in which 'The religious aristocracy ... proclaimed to the overjoyed populace that forced labour was at an end, replaced by "voluntary labour", which would bring them ... all "true freedom and full citizenship" (p.22) does not change their slave status.

This mystified and constantly changing identity of the suffering masses of Africa debunks the countless empty independence celebrations in African states - ceremonies which only achieve the changing of colonial names of the territories to ancient names (already tainted by ancient tyrannical semi-divine rulers) which are exhumed from the debris of medieval Africa. The attainment of independence in Africa becomes a hollow ritual of designing new flags which replace the colonial ones. The novel intimates that the full citizenship which replaces slavery and forced labour in Nakem is nothing but a disguised prison labour

which is worse than slavery. Thus, Nakem-Ziuko, symbolizing the old-new dichotomy of postcolonial African states, attains what cynical Africans call a "flag independence". The novel's closing declaration - 'projected into the world, one cannot help recalling that Saif, mourned three million times, is forever reborn to history beneath the hot ashes of more than thirty African republics' (pp.181-182) - presents the super epic villains as both our progenitors and our heirs. The novel's historical reconstruction of pre-colonial Africa rejects the notion of Africa's Golden Age by suggesting that the racial splendour unwittingly celebrated by Black historians and writers is the human gold - slavery - which feeds the marvellous and sumptuous lifestyle of the god-like tyrants of Africa. By making Isaac ben Isaac al-Heit, the evil political genius, outlive all the characters as well as ourselves, the readers, *Bound to Violence* immortalizes the legendary tyrants of Africa and suggests that the ruled are in for eternal servitude and exploitation. The only recourse left for the educated class is to become permanent academic protesters. The violence that the postcolonial African is invited to do himself is an intellectual one - an academic rude awakening which makes us perceive the reality of the politics of violence and how we unwittingly aid these destructive forces which demolish us. Ouologuem's view of history is illuminated by Walter Benjamin's sublime insight:

> This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.
>
> (Benjamin, 1968:257-258)

The pathology of the historical cycle of stagnation and the archaeology of man's barbarities are the thematic concerns of not only Ouologuem's work but also of the other four novels in this study. Benjamin summarises this vision eloquently. Though *Bound*

to Violence deals the most devastating blow to Africa's image and the romanticized notions of pre-colonial Africa, its thesis is not as negative as most African critics make it out to be. The novel succeeds in its Janus-faced iconoclastic attack: to deflate contemporary Africa's nostalgia for traditional Africa's legendary past, which, the work contends, begot the dark continent's culture of despotism and ruthless exploitation of the ruled; and to suggest how the ruled could become protesting victims instead of perpetually being the naive pawns in the deadly game of power politics which makes them the battleground.

NOTES

1. This epigram from an Afro-Cuban myth which highlights the human universal search for the truth which is eternally mystified in falsehood is taken from Biodun Jeyifo's 'The Nature of Things: Arrested Decolonization and Critical Theory' (1990:33). *Research in African Literatures*, 21, 1 (1990), p.33.

2. In his article, 'Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?' (1991), Kwame Anthony Appiah defines '*neo-traditional*' work of art as that work which is created in a postcolonial society by a modern/postcolonial artist who uses traditional tools and materials in fashioning a piece of art that incorporates both the traditional and postcolonial/modern modes of production. The result is a project which is neither pure traditional nor pure modern/postcolonial but rather a synthesis of the two - neo-traditional.

3. The irony of Eric Sellin's literary fame, achieved by exhuming dirty bits of information on the controversy generated by the case of plagiarism against Yambo Ouologuem, is that it mirrors that of Shrobenius in the novel!

4. These articles are Matthieu Galey's '*Le Devoir de Violence* de Yambo Ouologuem, un Grand Roman Africain', in *Le Monde* (12 October 1968:i), and Philippe Decraene's 'Un Nigre a Part Entier', in *Le Monde* (12 October 1968:i).

5. Hurbert de Leusser's view (1971:88, cited in Ohaegbu, 1979:124) confirms the suspicion of African critics who fear that the overblown distorted structure of the novel might generate more racially-biased criticism of Africa's image.

6. Yves Benot's '*Le Devoir de Violence* de Yambo Ouologuem, Est-il un Chef-d'Oeuvre ou une Mystification?' (1970:128, cited in Ohaegbu, 1979:124) also bases the novel's quality on its virulent denigration of African values.

7. Simon Simonse's footnoted information in 'African Literature Between Nostalgia and Utopia' (1982:486), which asserts that Leopold Senghor was once called the "Black Pearl of French civilization", confirms my view that negritudist Black writers and master historians appear to be one of the targets of this caustic satiric novel.

stance towards traditional Africa, as epitomized by its rejection of Africa's legendary tradition and kingship, is echoed by the irreverence Friedrich Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ* (1968:100) projects towards 'all that is traditional and held in honour' by Western civilization. The study of Armah in this chapter will contend that his concern in *Two Thousand Seasons* is to divest

Chapter 5

The African Anti-Legendary Creative Mythology: Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*

> All innovators of the spirit bear for a time the pallid, fatalistic sign of the Chandala on their brow: *not* because they are felt to be so, but because they themselves feel the terrible chasm which divides them from all that is traditional and held in honour. Almost every genius knows as one of the phases of his development the 'Catilinarian existence'[1] , a feeling of hatred, revengefulness and revolt against everything which already *is*, which is no longer *becoming*....
>
> Friedrich Nietzsche. *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ* (1889).

In *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973; 1979)[2], Ayi Kwei Armah precision-designs a daring experimental style which is attuned to 'literary warfare' in order to create an anti-legendary mythology against traditional African epic heroism as well as an African counter-image against Euro-Arab misrepresentations. Armah's rhetorical weaponry is akin to the stylistic structure of the literature Frantz Fanon defines in his *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961:193-194) as 'a literature of combat' - 'a revolutionary literature'. The above epigram, taken from Friedrich Nietzsche's work, reverberates with the thrust of Armah's novel: a literary revolt against sacrosanct traditions. The novel's irreverent stance towards traditional Africa, as epitomized by its rejection of Africa's legendary tradition and kingship, is echoed by the irreverence Friedrich Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ* (1968:100) projects towards 'all that is traditional and held in honour' by Western civilization. The study of Armah in this chapter will contend that his concern in *Two Thousand Seasons* is to divest

traditional Africa of its bombastic legendary image and to replace this with a mythology crafted around the aesthetics of communal ethos. In order to effect his dismantling of the legendary heroes and the romanticized traditional notions of pre-Euro-Arab Africa, Armah revises both Africa's history and traditions of the African oral arts by replacing the old historical landmarks and myths with his own re-created anti-legendary historical consciousness and mythology. It is crucial to emphasize the fact that *Two Thousand Seasons* re-writes the African oral epic as a genre. The novel's ingenious manipulation of the epic tradition amounts to a parodying of the tradition of the African oral arts. Although it will be overstretching my interpretation to talk about the novel's assimilation of metafictional devices, Patricia Waugh's definition of the technique of parody as a 'creation plus critique' in her *Metafiction* (1984) does in fact help point towards the novel's parodic manipulation of the African oral epic tradition. Waugh also asserts that '... new developments in fiction have always tended to evolve through the parody of older or outworn conventions' (1984:68-69). The text's parodic mode is not only an attempt to overhaul the hyperbolic and pompous stylistic structure of the ancient African epic tradition, but it is also intended to be used as a literary lynch-pin in demolishing the false pretensions of the legendary and supernatural kings of pre-colonial Africa and their heirs, the modern political leaders of contemporary Africa. The anti-legendary epic construct - an epic heroic construct shorn of all its fabulous and flamboyant garb - amounts to both a subversion and a re-creation of the tradition of the African oral arts. Linda Hutcheon confirms this interpretation in her *Narcissistic Narrative* (1980) when she declares that 'Parodic art is both a deviation from the norm and includes that norm within itself as backgrounded material' (1980:50). It is, therefore, argued that *Two Thousand Seasons* re-creates a new mythology for Africa - a mythological creative reconstruction which is stripped of both indigenous and alien ideologies - from the splinters of

its own destruction of the African oral traditions, the tyrannical warrior-kingship rituals and the Euro-Arab distorted myths about Africa.

The novel's deconstructed history of Africa also challenges the existing African and Euro-Arab versions of African history, and the usable African historical myths because they are deemed to be tainted with either Euro-Arab racial distortions or with the primeval racial 'infantilism' (the 'Noble Savage Image'), enshrined by fantastic fabrications of Africa's tyrannical god-like kings. It is hypothesized that the novel's anti-traditional and anti-colonial posture flows from the premise that the existing historiography and myths of Africa are polluted with either what Isidore Okpewho's 'Myth and Modern Fiction: Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*' (1983) describes as 'indices of the intellectual infancy of the [African] race' (1983:4) or with 'imported' Euro-Arab historical misrepresentations. All textual evidence suggests that Armah's creative purpose in this novel is to eschew the 'extreme form of esthetically controlled fiction' - *romance* - and move towards the 'extreme forms of intellectually controlled fiction' - *didactic* - to quote from Robert Scholes's and Robert Kellogg's *The Nature of Narrative* (1966:105-106). As Scholes and Kellogg point out, the 'fictional generalization of reality is governed by two opposing impulses: the esthetic and the intellectual, the desire for beauty and the desire for truth' (Scholes and Kellogg, 1966:105). I postulate that Armah's aim is governed by 'the desire for truth' - the truth as he perceives it through his own Afrocentric-oriented creative vision. This view is substantiated by what Solo says in Armah's *Why Are We So Blest?* (1974) about the creative role of the African artist and the beauty-truth impulses of 'fictional generalization of reality':

> Why not simply accept the fate of an artist, and like a Western seer, close my eyes to everything around, find relief in discrete beauty, and make its elaboration my vocation? Impossible.... I hear the call of that art too. But in the world of my people that most important

> first act of creation, that rearrangement without which all attempts at creation are doomed to falseness, remains to be done.... In this wreckage there is no creative art outside the destruction of destroyers. In my people's world, revolution would be the only art, revolutionaries the only creators. All else is part of Africa's destruction.
>
> (*Why Are We So Blest?*, 1974:231)

The desire to pursue the truth at the expense of the aesthetics appears to direct a number of other radically-oriented African writers too, such as Ousmane and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. The authoritative style and tone that is adopted by the narratorial collective voice, in *Two Thousand Seasons*, is akin to what Northrop Frye calls 'the *high mimetic mode*' (1957:34). In his work, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye defines the hero of this fictional mode as follows (1957:33-34):

> If superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a leader. He has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours, but what he does is subject to social criticism and to order of nature. This is the hero of the *high mimetic* mode, of most epic and tragedy....

And Frye continues (1957:58):

> For the high mimetic poet is pre-eminently a courtier, a counsellor, a preacher, a public orator or a master of decorum ... As a rule the high mimetic poet tends to think of his function in relation to social or divine leadership, the theme of leadership being at the center of his normal fictional mode.

Frye's articulation of 'the high mimetic mode' echoes the stylistic medium which is manipulated by this novel. But, like all the other generic categories, this narrative model is neither allowed to function in its original state nor permitted to dominate. It operates only as a modified and Africanised stylistic element of the novel's oral-oriented narrative structure. The novel's innovative didactic style evolves from the reassembly of the African oral devices and European literary modes which have been ingeniously revised and African-traditionalised.

The hypothesis outlined above will be investigated by approaching Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* as a simulated African folk narrative and trying to exploit the evaluative tools of the literary historian and the literary critic. One crucial problem must, however, be indicated from the start: Armah's handling of his narrator's polyphonic voices. Armah's orchestration of the complex opposing narrative voices of his protean narrator accounts for the baffling sensations generated within this unconventional novel: the superficial and the illusory physical paradise versus the structuring lamentation of 'two thousand seasons of slavery and destruction', and the African counter-image versus the anti-legendary (anti-traditional) posture. It is argued that Armah in *Two Thousand Seasons* writes under the guise of a monolithic composite body of visionary ancestral spirits masquerading as the Priestess Anoa and as the voices of all the communal visionaries of Abibiman[3] - past, present (including the initiates led by Isanusi) and future - achieving his didactic purpose by juggling these conflicting narratorial voices. The protean 'we' narrator conveys this sensibility when, in the prologue, he reveals the composite identity of the narratorial voice by listing those who constitute the eclectic narrator: 'The linking of those gone, ourselves here, those coming ...' (p.xiv).

This reading will attempt to reconcile the thrust of this chapter with some of the controversial critical pronouncements on Armah's manipulation of the 'historical and contemporary Africa through a system of ideas, images, and symbols carefully structured into a visionary ideal' (Kofi Anyidoho, 1981-82:109)[4]. Besides the above explicative concerns, this study will also probe the debate these critical views provoke about the theory of 'historical realism' and 'artistic reality' in literature. My immediate task is to determine the validity of approaching *Two Thousand Seasons* as an African folk narrative.

The rationale for reading the text as an African oral epic is vindicated by the fact that the two opposing critical camps in the debate surrounding the work's 'realism' are unanimous about the novel's incorporation of African oral epic narrative devices. One of the earliest critical allusions to the work's orality comes from Charles Larson, who asserts in his review, 'Ayi Kwei Armah's African Reciprocity', that the novel is 'a parable of epic proportions - in many ways more like an oral tale told by a griot, a song of life and death, than a realistic story ...' (1974:117). In his 'The African Historical Novel and the Way Forward', Hugh Webb also maintains that Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* 'is epic in sweep' and has a 'total epic-dialectic form' (1980:32). The novel's orature is given a further endorsement by Derek Wright in his seminal work, *Ayi Kwei Armah's Africa: The Sources of His Fiction* (1989), when he criticizes the text's artificial orality while praising its oral-tradition-based structure by observing that the work's 'literary form has been evolved out of his [Armah's] refashioning of the devices of an African tradition which has ... an ancient pedigree: the tradition of the griot, the story-teller or oral historian who speaks with the voice of the whole community and whose legends, folk-tales and proverbs are stored in the communal memory' (1989:222-223). The novel's folk narrative structure is further confirmed by Neil Lazarus's recent work, *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction*. Lazarus contends that the novel's style is 'designed to approximate the oral delivery of ancestral community poets' and concludes that *Two Thousand Seasons*'s achievement 'might be said to consist formally in its embrace of the idiom of orature' (1993:216).

The Eurocentric critical evaluations substantiating the novel's assimilation of the African oral traditions, which have been reviewed above, are eloquently sanctioned by African critics. Kofi Yankson declares in his '*Two Thousand Seasons:* A Review' that the novel's style is "rooted in the virtuosity of Africa's narrative and lyric arts" and the

narrating voice 'sounds like a Fante old man recounting some incident from a hundred years back...' 1975:112). Emmanuel Ngara, who is more concerned with identifying Marxist influence on African literature in his *Art and Ideology in the African Novel*, also alludes to the folk narrative features of the work. Ngara declares that 'Like an epic, *Two Thousand Seasons* is an amalgam of myth, history and fiction' (1985:115).[5] The most comprehensive analysis of this novel's manipulation of traditions of the African oral arts is provided by Isidore Okpewho in his works: *Myth in Africa* (1983a: 203-215) and 'Myth and Modern Fiction: Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*' (1983b:1-23). Okpewho's illuminating critique, which confirms the other views on the novel's orature, maintains that '*Two Thousand Seasons* is a racial epic' (1983b:7) and posits Armah's inventive adaptation of the oral epic tradition which it subverts in order to re-affirm.

Having reviewed the question of my approach to the text as an African oral epic, I shall now outline the plot-summary and Armah's mythic framework which shapes and informs this enigmatic and didactic novel, evoking both harsh condemnation and high praise from many critics. *Two Thousand Seasons* recreates prehistoric Black Africa and the early stages of Euro-Arab contact with the African continent. Armah's pre-colonial Africa has no hereditary rulers - the traditional repositories of Africa's cultural treasures and moral values. The patriarchs who rule this world are elected on merit and are called 'caretakers'. This idyllic society, the text intimates, ironically conceals and nourishes its own worms of decay. The novel identifies the inborn weakness of Armah's world as 'the puny tearing efforts of the ostentatious cripples' (p.6) - the inner cracks later intensified by alien invasions - 'an external force' that adds 'its overwhelming weight' (p.6) to the ongoing process of disintegration. The leadership of 'caretakers' is indicted by the Priestess Anoa for its innate avarice. During the passage of time this

'chiefless' polity is slowly poisoned morally and cracked from within, and finally fragmented by its own inherent weaknesses, which are later compounded by Euro-Arab intrusions. The final demise of the rule of 'caretakers' ushers in the rule of women - the period of superabundance called 'the fertile time' (p.10). The period of plenitude which is often misread as a paradisal epoch by many critics is ironically a veiled take-off point for a more insidious form of slavery and a launching pad for the establishment of the parasitic rule of chiefs, whose innate rapacity, intensified by alien influence, subverts and transforms the fictive world of the novel into a community dominated by tyranny, crass materialism, and parasitic existence.

Two Thousand Seasons is woven around Anoa's prophecy. The twin visionary voices of the Priestess Anoa predict both doom and emancipation or redemption for this world. While the voice of calamity prophesies that the Black race's flow of life will be violently interrupted by 'two thousand seasons' ('one moist and one dry') of slavery, violence and destruction (p.17), the voice of salvation, offers a faint ray of hope. Emancipation will be achieved, Anoa tells us, through the concerted efforts of all the hunted after two thousand seasons of servitude (p.205). Armah's Africa is ordained to submit to this inescapable period of holocaust before achieving the communal retrieval of 'the way', - the communal ethos which had been slowly eroded, forgotten and repressed for centuries before the advent of the Arabs and the Europeans. The only people in the community who still have a hazy memory of this ancient way of life are the sages, the seers and the visionaries.

Since this prophecy provides the signposts for interpreting the text, it becomes critical to stress the text-reader relationship here. Although I do not endorse the 'Anglo-American New Critics and the French Structuralists', to quote from Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction* (1983:117),

who 'treated the text as a more or less autonomous object' and agree with the current orientation which 'stresses the reciprocal relations between text and reader', it is argued that the degree of freedom given the reader by *Two Thousand Seasons* is more limited than the latitude offered in Armah's other novels. The mythological-cum-allegorical structure of this novel appears to pre-shape the reader's reconstruction of the text. This thesis posits, therefore, that the Anoa mythology - Armah's mirror which reflects the past, the present, and the future - exercises a supreme proprietorship over all the characters and events of the novel. To this mythological melting pot, it is postulated, all the interpretative pieces of the text must submit. It is asserted that any reading of the novel which is irreconcilable with Armah's creative alchemy is likely to be a misreading of the text. In his article 'Implicit Premises on Text and Reader in Genette's Study on Narrative Mood' Cees J. van Rees questions G. Genette's thesis on text-oriented criticism which argues that the text provides information about how it should be read - a thesis discussed in Genette's *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1980). The paraphrased gist of Genette's thesis, which is rejected by van Rees, is as follows: '... the narrative text is deemed to be an entity which by itself provides information about the way in which it should be read' (van Rees, 1985:447). Although I do not think that any text provides the reader with the "Open, Sesame!" magical password, I argue that every text provides some guidelines about its intended deeper meanings. These signposts become the information on how the text should be approached. Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* offers such hints about how it should be entered.

The period of one thousand years of slavery ('two thousand seasons') which must be endured could be likened to what Victor Turner's work, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), defines as rites of passage and 'liminal' conditions which exist during the transitional phases between

movements of neophytes from one status to another. The undifferentiated relationship which 'the way' advocates in the work is curiously similar to Turner's 'communitas' - the relationship of initiates under the period of 'liminality' (1969:95-96).[6] Anoa's prophecy is the deep embedded structure which shapes and informs the novel. This, however, does not suggest that there is only one basic interpretation or version offered by the text.

The text's portrait of the Black African is similar to that of Murano[7] in Wole Soyinka's *The Road* (1965:44-45). The novel intimates that, like Soyinka's Murano, the Black African is a stereotyped threshold, suspended together with his world in a state of transition. In *Two Thousand Seasons* this state is generated by Anoa's prophecy of 'two thousand seasons' of slavery. The inhabitants of Anoa's mythic and allegorized world could be compared to the *pupae* which have no control over the liminal period nature has ordained for them before they can become moths (Turner, 1967:94). This study, therefore, questions those interpretations which perceive the various successful operations against enemies of the larger community in the novel as the 'final emancipation' or 'victory' promised by Anoa's prophecy, for *Two Thousand Seasons* 'is an unfinished chronicle of Africa's servitude' (Larson, 1974:117). This means that the period of 'two thousand seasons' - the 'liminal period of transition' described by Anoa - has not, within the novel's time frame, come to an end. To suggest that 'The Beautyful Ones' are finally born, therefore, amounts to a misreading of Armah's novel.

Armah's epic deconstruction - his most unconventional novel - is so plagued by extreme and contradictory reviews that sometimes it is difficult to accept the fact that the apparently irreconcilable critical evaluations are about the same text. The deconstructed historical experience of prehistoric and existential contemporary Africa presented by

this text is rejected by many critics. The most prominent among these are Bernth Lindfors (1980), Kirsten Holst Petersen (1976), Simon Simonse (1982), Charles R. Larson (1974) and Chinua Achebe (1982). The intensity of Lindfors's distaste for the historical consciousness presented by *Two Thousand Seasons* is revealed by the preponderance of the highly emotive words which dominate his article, 'Armah's Histories' (1980). The social vision projected by *Two Thousand Seasons* is curtly dismissed by Lindfors as 'a cartoon history' which 'offers' nothing but a 'negation of negation' instead of 'a positive vision'. The novel's re-interpretation of African historical and contemporary experience, Lindfors further declares, is the '... kind of xenophobic oversimplification which used to be found in B-grade films manufactured in Hollywood during the Second World War ....' Lindfors's diatribe is also directed at the novel for replacing the African 'usable historical myth' with 'the dangerous kind of lie that Frantz Fanon used to call a "mystification"' (Lindfors, 1982:90).

Simon Simonse's 'African Literature Between Nostalgia and Utopia' (1982) also contends that the novel lacks historical realism. Simonse argues that '... we find Armah evoking an African utopia that is far removed from actual historical reality' (1982:483). The novel's concept of history is also attacked by Derek Wright in his article, 'Orality in the African Historical Novel: Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* and Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*' (1988), for being 'theoretical and imprecise' (1988:99). Wright adds, and rightly too, that the novel's celebration of the 'aesthetics of communal ethos' which recommends the 'total rejection of family and kin urged upon Dovi' is 'highly un-African' (1988:100).

The negative criticism which castigates the novel's presentation of pre-Euro-Arab Africa as 'a Garden of Eden' is closely related to the view that its racial retrieval amounts

to 'a return to Africa's pristine values' - i.e. 'negritude reborn'. Again Lindfors sets the pattern by asserting that Armah's social vision is 'a philosophy of paranoia, an anti-racist racism - *in short negritude reborn*' (1982:90). This perception is endorsed by both Atta Britwum (1975) and Eustace Palmer (1981). Britwum's 'Hero-Worshipping in the African Novel' (1975), which offers a superficial analysis of the work and traces the novel's lack of 'historical realism' to Armah's failure to ground his text on 'Marxism-Leninism', dismisses *Two Thousand Seasons* as 'Negritude all over again.' Britwum concludes that Armah's novel offers nothing but a 'Sentimental vision, completely at variance with historical reality' (1975:15). Besides Britwum's rejection of the text for being artistically unrealistic, Palmer's 'Negritude Rediscovered: A Reading of the Recent Novels of Armah, Ngugi, and Soyinka' (1981) defines negritude writers as writers who 'sought to glorify and idealize traditional life' (1981:2). Using this as his working definition, Palmer classifies Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* as a negritude work. Palmer, however, adds a concluding qualification which negates his thesis:

> ... this exercise in racial retrieval, this return to origins, is part of the strategy for the transformation of modern society. It is much more therefore than a complacent, self-regarding idealization of blackness and black culture.... The ultimate target therefore, is not so much the white man, as the case with Negritude, as black men and contemporary black society. The retrieval of these pristine African values is not the end, merely the means.
>
> (Palmer, 1981:11)

The novel's presentation of pre-Euro-Arab Africa as a world without hereditary rulers and which is ruled only by 'elected caretakers' is vehemently repudiated by both Lindfors and Wright as the most distorted feature of the novel's visionary reconstruction of pre-Euro-Arab Africa. Lindfors declares that in Armah's '*legendary*'[8] prehistory of Ujamaa' (1980:86; my emphasis) 'rulers did not exist; the communities were acephalous, completely democratic ...' (Lindfors, 1980:89). Wright endorses Lindfors's critical viewpoint when he argues

that the text's portrayal of the notion of the 'kingless' Akan society is historically inaccurate, for 'acephalous communalism seems to have more to do with the Igbo than the monarchical Akan ...' (Wright, 1989:227).

The narrative and the stylistic patterning also has its share of the critical searchlight. Directing its critical stricture at the style, Kirsten Holst Petersen's '"The new way": Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*' (1976) attacks the novel's cocktail style. Petersen asserts that 'A pseudo-poetic pompous style, obviously meant to lend grandeur to the subject, does not improve matters' (1976:334). The work's experimental style is further questioned by Wright, who criticises the text's contrived griot-like style:

> In Armah's imitative version of griotature, oral in conception but literary in expression, the passage between forms is not assisted by an erratic and unhappy assortment of styles, ranging from the oracular and invocatory to the popular and idiomatically American.... Armah strains to reproduce an illusion of orality and, specifically, of vatic utterance through a formidable battery of rhetorical questions, lamentations and exclamations ("Hau"), not to mention some frenzied alliteration....
>
> (Wright, 1989:228)

Apart from Lindfors's critical invective, one of the most blunt dismissals of the novel comes from Chinua Achebe. Achebe claims in Karel L. Morell's *In Person: Achebe, Awoonor, and Soyinka* (1975) that *Two Thousand Seasons* 'is *a complete failure*'. Achebe then adds that 'It is [a] *fantasy*, but there is a certain logic to fantasy and I don't accept this one ...' (1975:13-15).

Most of the critics appear to be unanimous on one crucial point: that *Two thousand Seasons* portrays prehistoric Africa as *a non-competitive and non-violent paradise*. According to Lindfors and Petersen, the novel represents the prehistoric Black world as 'a Garden of Eden' (Lindfors 1982:95) enveloped in a 'prelapsarian bliss' (Petersen 1976:333). The reading of *Two Thousand Seasons*, which perceives Armah's

visionary reconstruction of prehistoric Africa as 'a Garden of Eden' is further echoed by Christophe Dailly's 'The Coming of Age of the African Novel' (1984). Dailly asserts that 'All features of pre-colonial Africa pictured in Armah's novel foster happiness ...' (Dailly, 1984:120). And like all other critics who misread Armah's work, Dailly cites 'the peace of that fertile time' (p.10) passage to support the paradise view.

Larson's (1974:119) short review article on *Two Thousand Seasons*, already cited, adds another dimension to the negative critical strictures on the novel. Larson interprets the cessation of the serialization of the novel by 'the Ghanaian Daily Graphic' (Armah, 1978:10) not only as evidence of the African readership's endorsement of the European critical rejection of the novel, but also as proof of Armah's failure as a writer: '*Ayi Kwei Armah is now trapped ... His intellectual growth has thrown him into a state worse than that of his characters. He has become a literary askari, writing for colons*' (Larson, 1974:119; emphasis mine).

This study discounts the negative evaluations of *Two Thousand Seasons* which present the novel as either 'a complete failure' (Achebe, 1975) or 'a cartoon history' (Lindfors, 1982) and argues that *Two thousand Seasons* is not as worthless in literary terms as some critics claim. Rand Bishop's flattering comment in his '*The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*: Armah's First Five Novels' (1982) challenges the critical invectives on the two novelistic histories:

> Just as after *The Beautyful Ones*, African literature would no longer be able to excoriate only the colonizer, after *Two Thousand Seasons* no longer would it be able to ignore the major event of the past five hundred years of African history - slavery - and its debilitating effects that reach insidiously into the late twentieth century, long after its abolition, long after the advent of political independence.... Taken together with the fifth work, *The Healers*, this pair of novels represents an exciting new development that sets Armah apart from the rest of his contemporaries.
>
> (Bishop, 1982:532-533)

Another Africanist who perceives something positive in Armah's novelistic history is Lazarus. Unlike Lindfors' and Achebe's total rejection of the text, Lazarus asserts that 'Measured against Armah's first three novels ... the central achievement of *Two Thousand Seasons* might be said to consist formally in its embrace of the idiom of orature and ... in its formulation of resistance as a collective practice' (Lazarus, 1990:221).

The bulk of the critical corpus which challenges the virulent rejection of Armah's fourth novel is made of African critics. Some of these critics take issue with the diatribes against Armah's work. The most eloquent of these are Chidi Amuta (1981;1989) and Kofi Anyidoho (1981-82; 1986). Amuta, in his *The Theory of African Literature* (1989), postulates that 'colonialist criticism' which Chinua Achebe condemns in his work, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (1988:46-61) and which is eloquently reaffirmed by many African writers, still permeates Eurocentric criticism of African literary texts. Amuta claims to have demystified the concealed motives behind Lindfors's 'colonialist criticism' of Armah's novelistic histories. According to Amuta, *Two Thousand Seasons* is negatively reviewed by Eurocentric critics because 'the moral depravity of contemporary Ghanaian and African polity' depicted in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and in *Fragments* is no longer the target of Armah's new 'literary warfare' - the 'fighting literature', to cite again from Fanon (1967:179). Because the literary bullets, Amuta argues, are now directed mainly against 'the centuries of European brigandage in Africa ... Bernth Lindfors dismisses *Two Thousand Seasons* as a dangerous book to put in the hands of young Africans and evaluates *The Healers* in similar vein ...' (Amuta, 1989:27)[9].

Amuta also attempts to unravel the reasons behind the negative and shallow critical pronouncements by African writer-critics on African literary texts. But although Amuta's commentary heading entitled 'The African Writer as

Literary Critic' provides only a partial answer to the problem, his insight illuminates some of the short-sightedness which permeates the critical evaluation of African writer-critics who appraise the works of other African writers. According to Amuta, the poor quality of criticism coming from some African writer-critics emanates from their propensity to perceive the works of other African writers through their own subjective world views (1989:27). Georg Lukacs (1971:198) substantiates this when he declares in his *Writer and Critic* that:

> No matter how broad the horizon of his social and personal interests or how original and profound his intellect, the writer-critic generally approaches aesthetic problems from the point of view of the concrete questions arising in his own creative work, and he refers his conclusion ... back to his own work.
> (Lukacs, 1971:198)

Amuta's and Lukacs's explicative formulations appear to explain partially Achebe's curt dismissal of *Two thousand Seasons*. Kofi Anyidoho also rejects Achebe's dismissal of Armah's work as a 'fantasy' and contends in his paper, 'African Creative Fiction and a Poetics of Social Change' (1986), that 'Far from being a fantasy of the historical past, it [*Two Thousand Seasons*] is concerned, above all, with the future of the African peoples' (1986:73). The work which has been summarily dismissed as 'a cartoon history' and 'a complete failure' by Achebe and Lindfors is described by Anyidoho as a masterpiece 'of contemporary African fiction' (1986:67). Complimentary views of the novel are unequivocally sustained by critics like Ime Ikiddeh (1986), Neil Lazarus (1990), Ato Sekyi-Otu (1987), Isidore Okpewho (1983a; 1983b) and Abena P.A. Busia (1986)[10].

Although this critique discounts the views that *Two Thousand Seasons*'s representation of prehistorical Africa is historically and artistically unrealistic as contended by many Eurocentric critics, it does not fully accept Amuta's explanation of 'colonialist criticism' as the root cause of the Eurocentric negative criticism of the novel, particularly

Lindfors's critical invective on the novel. Later in the course of this investigation, I will attempt to substantiate the hypothesis that the underlying causes of critical impasse arise from two major sources: the unfortunate connotations "didactic" fiction has acquired - the pejorative and the descriptive senses (Scholes and Kellogg, 1966:106) - and the complex and confusing debate that has developed around the theory of historiography, and what 'historical realism' and 'artistic reality' in literature consist of.

The immediate concern of this study is to examine how Armah manipulates Africa's oral epic traditions and historical experience in order to achieve his creative purpose. In his article, 'Style and Purpose in Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*', A. N. Mensah rationalizes and dramatizes what makes *Two Thousand Seasons* 'a problematic novel and pushes it toward the epic':

> Let us dramatize the situation a little and imagine the author declaring as follows: "I have a story of great importance to tell Africa. Not one of those stories of Africa's disintegration or of an individual African's inability to belong. No, this is something larger and more wholesome, telling of the tribulations of the tribe and ending with a glorious vision of Africa's reawakening and unification. Indeed, a grand public theme. But how do I tell such a story, this Pan-African saga? Of course! In the manner of the griots of old. In the manner of Niane's *Sundiata*!'
>
> (Mensah, 1991:5)

Though Mensah's view suggests that Armah's narrator tells his story 'in the manner of Niane's *Sundiata*', the collective bardic narrator's attitude to the sacrosanct African oral traditions is rather irreverent and irreconcilable with the traditional African epic heroism. In fact, the narrative structure of *Two Thousand Seasons* is self-consciously inconsistent with that of Niane's conventional African oral epic. This does not suggest that this novel does not assimilate elements from the African oral epic genre. Though the text incorporates selected features of the African oral

arts, this assimilation amounts to a dialectical and ideological revision of the genre.

Unlike Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* and Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*, which, despite their great departures from the African oral epic traditions, affirm the most fundamental element of the genre - the portrayal of individualized epic protagonists who are endowed with noble ancestry - Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* is centred around a collective heroic entity. The traditional single supernatural hero, the cardinal feature of oral epics, is replaced by a collective heroic ideal which is symbolized by the protean 'we' instead of the traditional 'I'. Armah's composite heroic ideal, or what Kofi Anyidoho calls the 'aesthetics of the communal ethos' in his 'African Creative Fiction and A Poetics of Social Change' (1986:68), constitutes his greatest deviation from the African oral epic tradition. Instead of the omnipotent hero, Armah assigns the epic heroic role to a group of initiates led by a sage, Isanusi[11] - a plural heroic entity stripped of all the supernatural attributes of the African conventional epic hero. The isolation of a single individual for glorification and detailed portraiture as demanded by the African oral epic tradition is rejected in favour of the celebration of the communal ideal. In Mofolo's *Chaka*, the anti-legendary narratorial voice which battles with the African traditional bardic voice for absolute control of the thrust of the narrative becomes the dominant voice only after Chaka has met Isanusi and has become king. In Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, the anti-epic narrator impersonates and dominates the voice of the traditional chronicler from the very beginning of the narrative to the very end, projecting a historical version of the past which is not only totally anti-epic and anti-traditional, but which also rejects Euro-Arab imperialist historical distortions. The pervasive voice of irreverence generated by the novel against the African legendary tradition is confirmed by Kofi Anyidoho:

> Armah's novel is not about individual characterization and the creation of heroes .... Historical realism may

> celebrate individual characters and events, but only because each one is seen in isolation from the total environment. The novelist brings all events and all characters together into one flowing stream, and suddenly the splendour of heroes is soiled by the mess they themselves created in their obscene haste for glory.
>
> (Anyidoho, 1981-1982:109)

The anti-epic narrator in *Two Thousand Seasons* contemptuously dismisses past and present legendary heroes of Africa as 'single peacocks strutting against each other's glory' (p.42). What is being gradually unfolded here is not only a rejection of the usable historical old myths of Africa, but also a reinterpretation of African history and a recreation of a new mythology for Africa. The novel treats racist colonial myths and indigenous African ones which were crafted by supernatural despotic kings to enslave the people alike. As Amuta points out in his 'Ayi Kwei Armah and the Mythopoesis of Mental Decolonization', Armah's 'use of myth to achieve mental freedom involves, first, the debunking of the outgrowths of the primary racist mythic supposition' and the fabulous mythic fabrications of African tyrannical kings, 'accompanied by the erection of counter-myths' (1981:46). Anyidoho affirms Armah's narrator's ambivalent attitude to the past - his denigration and recreation/redefinition of the past - when he asserts that '... in transforming historical experience into fictional discourse, Armah both subverts and recreates history' (Anyidoho, 1981-1982:109). Armah's equivocal attitude to the African oral epic tradition is further confirmed by Okpewho's comment:

> In *Two Thousand Seasons* Armah acknowledges the power and charm of the African oral tradition; but he will have none of that social stratification which the tales advertise. What we have in the book is a tale in the oral style all right, but one that is intensely critical rather than eulogistic or designed to please, one that rejects the present social history of Africa as unrepresentative of its true character and so projects us, in true prophetic fashion, to a vision of an Africa that is free of its shackles and guided by an ideology or religion....
>
> (Okpewho, 1983a:205)

Armah's creative purpose is to refashion a new Afrocentric identity for Africa. Since the old fantastic myths of supernatural heroes and magical kings are rejected, Armah's novel demolishes the existing Black image of Africa in order to recreate a new one - an image grounded on communal wholeness. Individualized fabulous heroes of the past have no place in Armah's new mythology. This interpretation is cogently articulated by Chidi Amuta (1981). Amuta declares that 'Armah is concerned with myth not as an anonymous tale of ethnic origins or the genealogy [sic] of the pantheon of godlings in the ethnic arsenal but as a consistent pattern of perceiving reality or relating with it'. He concludes, and rightly so, that Armah 'is allergic to myth as a commonly held figment, a consciously invented belief system that is fostered and perpetuated for the specific purpose of advancing the interests of the myth-making group at the expense of all other groups' (1981:45). This comment reveals the two-pronged dimension of the text's manipulation of myth-making: both the colonial racist myths and those of the African god-like tyrannical kings are exploded.

In *Two Thousand Seasons*, Armah's anti-legendary narrator not only divests his narration of all the flamboyant and bombastic rhetorical flourishes, he also inverts what Isidore Okpewho calls the sense of the moment - the stage in which a portentous event occurs in the life of the epic hero. In African epics climactic alerts are used to evoke or initiate praise singing triggered by wondrous feats of bravery by the epic hero. In Armah's novel, the climactic alert 'Hau!' is frequently deployed to signal the sense of the moment. But contrary to the ancient African epic tradition, instead of the expected evocation of glorification and celebration, the oral climactic alerts only invoke lamentation and rhetorical exclamations. The oral alert 'Hau!' opens the prologue to the novel as follows: 'Hau, people headed after the setting sun, in that direction even the possibility of regeneration is dead' (p.xi). The setting sun is a symbol that permeates the

novel, representing the source of derailment for Africa's natural flow of life - the Arabs whom the text labels 'the desert predators'. The novel intimates that the chiefs are not the only ones who are mentally blind or idiotic and it evokes this sad state of affairs with the eulogistic alert reserved for initiating praise singing: 'Hau! It is *not only rife among the fatted chiefs, this idiocy* of the destroyed' (p.7). The novel eschews eulogies which traditionally characterize African epics as the ritualization of tragedies and lamentations. This anti-panegyric patterning is further substantiated by 'Hau! What a shrivelling there has been in the spirits of our people; what a destructive fragmentation of our soul!' (p.184). Another graphic illustration of how the narrator inverts the rhetorical alerts by negating the normal positive function of the climactic repetitions which generate lyrical feeling concerned with pleasing the ear is the incident in which the ex-slaves and the initiates defeat the European slave traders and free all the slaves. This 'illusory' victory would have been celebrated by the conventional African epic tradition. But in *Two Thousand Seasons*, instead of the expected panegyrical flourishes and celebration, what the anti-legendary narrator offers the reader 'is either a condemnatory ring ... or ... harsh admonitory din so as to burn the message indelibly into the reader's mind ...' (Okpewho, 1983:7):

> But we should not stop the onward flow of work with overlong remembrance of single battles won, of new people welcomed, of the increase of courage for the journeys of the way. For this is mere beginning, not a time for the satisfaction of sweet remembrances.
> (p.179)

Armah's anti-traditional narrator's creative ploy of masking his hostile intentions to denigrate and to subvert Africa's legendary tradition by impersonating the voice of the traditional chronicler is demystified by his project, which is irreconcilable with that of the conventional oral epic bard. *Two Thousand Seasons*'s overt muffling of the traditional praise singing and celebration while amplifying

condemnation and sadness are illustrated by Okpewho. Okpewho, the Nigerian folklorist, asserts:

> Where the oral narrator would dwell at considerable length on events that call for glorification with due rhetorical *elan*, Armah's narrator dismisses such events with only a flourish of rhetorical questions so that the audience is not diverted by cheap adulation from the urgent task that lies ahead.
>
> (Okpewho, 1983:7-8)

The most illuminating illustration of this anti-praise-singing posture is the narrator's suppression of the desire to celebrate the successful escape from the desert predators and the safe arrival in Anoa after the long and treacherous migration through the vast wilderness of prehistoric Africa. The sublime physical beauty of 'the promised' land invokes and forces praise singing from the reluctant lips of the narrator, but he successfully suppresses the panegyrical impulse struggling within his breast (p.56):

> With what shall the utterer's tongue stricken with goodness, riven silent with the quiet force of beauty, with which mention shall the tongue of the utterers begin a song of praise whose perfect singers have yet to come?
> And the time for singing, whence shall the utterers, whence the singers gather it when this remembrance is no easy celebration but a call to the terrifying work of creation's beginning? ... This promise of a praise song will pass swiftly .... (p.56)

The expected eulogizing is reduced to rhetorical exclamations and the intimation that celebration will be premature since 'creation's work' is just beginning and final victory or emancipation is two thousand seasons away. The purpose of Armah's narrator is not only to annihilate the legendary tradition but also to correct and re-write the African oral epic aesthetics. In an unambiguously virulent tone, the anti-legendary voice of irreverence presents traditional Africa's panegyrics as empty flattery and the traditional oral artist as a degenerate. Using Isanusi as the focalizer, the narrator scornfully dismisses traditional bards and court historians as mercenaries who prostitute the African traditional oral arts:

> Isanusi ... went to the town of Poano .... There he saw the victory of the white destroyers, the utter destruction of souls. He saw there was *no fundi* there who *was not first of all a prostitute. Experts in the art of eloquence* he saw *bought to speak for thieves.* Experts in the art of singing he saw *bought to sing the praises not just of one parasite, the king, but also of any bloated passer who could pay their paltry price.* (p.103, my emphasis)

The thrust of the novel is that the fabulous tales of Africa's Golden Age of supernatural kings are nothing but an invention of impotent flatterers who immortalized their masters, the self-created god-like kings, to promote their own physical survival. The decay of the traditions of the African oral arts fictionalized in *Two Thousand Seasons* is corroborated in Kofi Awoonor's doctoral thesis, *A Study of the Influences of Oral Literature on the Contemporary Literature of Africa* (1972). Awoonor's formulation, which is more applicable to West African grioture than to the Southern African *izibongo*, asserts that some West African oral artists, particularly among the Yoruba, the Hausa and the Wolof, have become "mercenaries": 'professional praise-singers who follow their patron through the streets, beating out his patronymic salutations, and heaping upon him an exaggerated array of praise epithets':

> They may liken him to the elephant to signify his strength, the fox for his sagacity, the cow for his meekness. If he recognizes their work and rewards them, he may soon be elevated to the status of a lion, leopard or such other noble beast. *But if he makes the mistakes of ignoring them, he may soon be likened to the red-bottomed baboon, or the greedy goat who ate too much at his own mother's funeral and thus befouled the funeral compound.*
>
> (Awoonor, 1972:26, my emphasis)

Although the oral artist who works for the powerful chief does not have this poetic licence, Awoonor's insight reveals the potential progressive degeneration of African traditional arts, satirized by Armah's irreverent neo-traditional narrator. The sullied image of the traditional bard is not only linked to the general moral abyss of traditional rulers who are perceived as parasites but it also leads naturally to

the creation of an anti-legendary mythology which does not spare contemporary African leaders either. In the most corrosive indictment against pre-colonial and modern Africa - the African oral artist, the chief and his beneficiary, the modern African leader - the anti-legendary narrator unveils the African notables' propensity for hero-worshipping, self-indulgence and praise singing. The text manipulates the character of Kamuzu to project this vision:

> Nor was he [Kamuzu] satisfied merely with our proffered services as praise-singers: the buffoon must have suspected some humour in our chanting. He found an old singer with a high, racing voice to sing for him, and a hireling drummer brought from Poano beat out the words on mercenary skin for his flattery. (p.172)

If the above comment does not unmask Kamuzu's obsession for self-deification enough, the protean anti-traditional narratorial voice - intent on leading the reader to perceive Kamuzu in totally negative terms - seals his castigation with a moralistic stamp by adding that 'When he was not steeped in self-flattery Kamuzu raged against us for our continued hostility to the white destroyers' (p.172). The most caustic censure of praise singing is the text's satiric attack on the King: 'Bulukutu, he who gave himself a thousand grandiose, empty names of praise yet died forgotten except in the memories of laughing rememberers ...' (pp.63-64). Besides the manipulation of traditions of the African oral arts in order to effect the demolition of the old fabulous image of the past and to replace the false image with a new communally-oriented image, *Two Thousand Seasons* also re-orders African history through a process of de-mythification of the Euro-Arab myths of Africa and a re-creation of a new African mythology.

Though many critics, especially Africans, contend that the preoccupation of the novel's myth-making is influenced by Marxist ideas, the replacement of legendary tales with communally-based tales projects more of Fanonian revolutionary ideas, I believe, than those of Karl Marx:

> ... the oral tradition - stories, epics and songs of the people - which formerly were filed away as set pieces are now beginning to change. The storytellers who used to relate inert episodes now ... introduce modifications which are increasingly fundamental. There is a tendency to bring conflicts up to date and modernize the kinds of struggle which the stories evoke, together with the names of the heroes and the types of weapons. ... the storytellers ... completely overturned their traditional methods and contents of their tales.
>
> (Fanon, 1965:193)

The didactic structure of the novel and its parodic stylistic tropes and modes which are programmed to dismantle the African legendary tradition appear to echo the Fanonian sentiments expressed in the above quotation.

Although African traditional epics are structured around epic heroes and praise singing, Armah's anti-epic collective narrator deviates from the African oral tradition and crafts his tale around a concept - 'the way'. Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* is a didactic fictional history, to borrow from Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1973), which combines 'a certain amount of "data," theoretical concepts for "explaining" these data, and a narrative structure for' its 'presentation as an icon of sets of events presumed to have occurred in times past' (1973:ix). 'The way', which the novel deliberately locates in an indeterminate period in prehistoric Africa, is vaguely defined in negative terms. The narrator carefully explains that it is pointless and impossible for any people to trace their genesis with certainty: 'That we the black people are one people we know. ... How the very first of us lived, of that ultimate origin we have had unnumbered thoughts and more mere fables passed down to us from those gone before, but of none of this has any of us been told it was sure knowledge' (p.3). The text's self-conscious subversion of its own internal illusion of reliability and reality is a creative technique fashioned to deflate Euro-Arab claims to superior myths of origin whose superiority is said to emanate from their written status Okpewho asserts

that Armah has thus succeeded in creating a new myth around 'the way':

> A single historical moment or cultural act has achieved a semiotic value in the illustration of a chosen idea. *Two Thousand Seasons* thus fulfils one of the fundamental functions of myth, which is to transmute reality into fancy through the medium of symbolism.
>
> (Okpewho, 1983b.14)

Closely related to the demolition of the pre-colonial legendary tradition and the hero-worshipping enshrined in contemporary African political culture (which is faithfully copied from the ancient fabulous image of god-like kings) is the novel's subversion of Euro-Arab myths about Africa - an elaborate process of de-mythification. One of the many graphic examples which permeate this novel runs as follows:

> We have not found that lying trick to our taste, the trick of making up sure knowledge of things impossible to think of, things possible to wonder about but impossible to know in any such ultimate way. We are not stunted in spirit, we are not Europeans, we are not Christians that we should invent fables a child would laugh at and harden our eyes to preach them daylight and deep night as truth. We are not so warped in soul, we are not Arabs, we are not Muslims to fabricate a desert god chanting madness in the wilderness, and call our creature creator. That is not our way. (p.3)

Through this technique, the anti-imperial narratorial voice explodes the Euro-Arab myths which portray pre-Euro-Arab Africa as a dark continent of pagans and unbelievers. The holy texts on which this religious bigotry is founded are the Bible and the Koran. By referring to the scriptures as 'fables a child would laugh at', the Afrocentric narrative voice ridicules the very criterion by which the traditional Africans are branded as idol-worshippers. The de-mythification is extended to the Islamic faith which also perceives pre-Arab Africa as a primitive continent populated by infidels. Speaking with tongue in cheek, the anti-Arab narrator asserts that 'We are not so warped in soul, we are not Arabs, we are not Muslims to fabricate a desert god chanting madness in the wilderness, and call our creature creator. That is not our way' (p.3). Wright confirms the

text's didactic thrust and its manipulation of 'the way' when he asserts that Armah's 'didactic purpose is to cure an errant Africa of its diseased distrust in its own indigenous forms and values' and concludes that 'The dogma of the Way works from the premise that one made-up ethno-centred history, serving one set of ideological needs, is as good as or better than another one which serves different and alien needs' (1988:96).

Amuta confirms the thrust of this critique when he asserts that 'In addition to the much talked about preoccupation with historical reconstruction, *Two Thousand Seasons* contains a great deal of de-mythification' (1981:46). Amuta argues that 'the ideological launching pad of Arab and Western imperialism as contained in the' Islamic religion and the Christian faith 'are easily deflated' by the text. The two major religions - Islam and Christianity - which portray African traditional religious practices as paganistic are ridiculed. The text's sneer intimates that the Christian God and the Islamic Allah as portrayed by the Bible and the Koran, respectively, are 'bloated kings' (p. 83). The narrator's 'unmaking' of the Christian and Islamic 'masquerades', Amuta contends, suggests 'the superiority of the belief system of "the way" which emphasizes anthropomorphism over "the fables of children" that Christianity and Islam propagate (Amuta, 1981:46). In an essay entitled 'Masks and Marx ...', Armah reveals the Afrocentric sentiments which generate this anti-imperialist posturing by asserting that 'In religion, African religious practices and beliefs were given negative values as superstitions while Western religious practices and beliefs were defined as the true religion' (Armah, 1984:41).

The novel's historical reconstruction is not only concerned with challenging the extensive misrepresentation of African history but also with divesting legendary historical figures and traditional rulers of their false pretensions and

fabulous epic image. Like Mofolo's *Chaka*, *Two Thousand Seasons* appropriately begins by dismissing the Eurocentric version of African history:

> The air everywhere around is poisoned with truncated tales of our origins. That is also part of the wreckage of our people. What has been cast abroad is not a thousandth of our history, even if its quality were truth. The people called our people are not the hundredth of our people. But the haze of this fouled world exists to wipe out our knowledge of our way, the way. (p.1)

Another assumption which is projected by the text is the narrator's proprietorship over Africa. The pan-Africanist narrator asserts authoritatively that 'This land is ours, not through murder, not through theft, not by way of violence or any other trickery' (pp.3-4). Derek Wright's most recent article, 'Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*', reconfirms this view by arguing that 'Armah's self-consciously staged griot-like discourse is concerned to correct the method of narrating African history as well as the history itself. There are, therefore, some significant departures from story-telling traditions' (1992:84). In his 'Ayi Kwei Armah, History, and "The Way": The Importance of *Two Thousand Seasons*', Amuta declares that 'The historical reconstruction which is largely the preoccupation of *Two Thousand Seasons* is the result of Armah's aversion to the large-scale misrepresentation and distortion of African history in both colonialist and Eurocentric African historiography'. It is further argued that the novel begins the tale 'by rejecting an "imported history of Africa, resolutely' (1981:80). *Two Thousand Seasons'* revision of history is pan-Africanist in scope and the text achieves this continental dimension by resorting to multifarious techniques. One of these is the technique of using names from almost the entire fabric of African ethnic groups. The names deployed include Soyinka, Mofolo, Nandi, Noliwe, Ngubane, Abena, Dovi, Kamara, Manda, Kamuzu, Otumfuo and Isanusi. The anti-traditional narrator reaches the climax of his de-mythification project when he

links his anti-legend posturing with the famous pilgrimage to Mecca by Emperor Mansa Musa I of Mali.

Emperor Mansa Musa I of Mali (1307-1337) is isolated for vilification and stripping down because he is one of the most legendary historical figures in both African history and the history of the Black diaspora. His historic pilgrimage to Mecca, besides his military conquests and economic development, was his greatest historical achievement and it is overtly celebrated in both African and African American history. J.D. Fage's *A History of Africa* confirms the authenticity of Mansa Musa's historical achievement when he asserts that 'Musa is variously reported to have crossed the Sahara with 8000 to 15 000 retainers, and to have taken so much gold with him - and to have spent it so lavishly - that the value of the metal in Egypt was depreciated by 12 per cent ..(Fage, 1978:75). D.T. Niane's account in his work, *General History of Africa IV* (1984), confirms Mansa Musa's legendary image. Niane also records that 'Mansa Musa I is the best known of the emperors of Mali, largely because of his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1325 and the widespread fame of his visit to Cairo, where he gave away so much gold that the precious metal was depressed for a long time.' The famous emperor was said to have carried so much gold that 'the rest of the world think of his empire as an El Dorado' (Niane, 1984:148). The African American historian, John Hope Franklin also substantiates Emperor Mansa Musa's place in the annals of African history and the history of the Black diaspora when he reveals in his *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* that the legendary Mali emperor's pilgrimage to Mecca is historic because it offers undisputed evidence of the existence of the Golden Age in pre-colonial Africa. Franklin declares that 'The historic pilgrimage of Mansa Musa in 1325 exceeded all visits to Mecca by previous royal personages from the West and was to be matched by few, if any, in years to come.' His retinue 'was composed of thousands of persons, a large portion of which constituted a

military escort'; 'five hundred servants ... each bearing a staff of pure gold'; and 'eighty camels to bear his more than twenty-four thousand pounds of gold' (Franklin, 1980:7).

It is this irrefutable historical landmark the irreverent narrator of *Two Thousand Seasons* takes apart. The novel's extension of its neo-traditional literary warfare of the irreverent to Emperor Mansa Musa, not only intensifies its systematic dismantling of Africa's glorious past and ostentatious present, but also shows that Africa's fabulous historical figures cannot escape the text's iconoclastic drag-net. Thus, the neo-traditional narrator disdainfully dismisses Emperor Mansa Musa's historic pilgrimage to Mecca as 'a ridiculous pomp' of 'an imbecile' (p.74). What is celebrated in history texts as a great historical achievement is debased, disfigured, and completely reversed by *Two Thousand Seasons*. The fictional version of this event curtly dismisses the recorded historical event as 'the stupid pilgrimage', 'a ridiculous pomp', and a 'gigantic wastage' which is celebrated by naive Black historians as 'some unspoken glory' for Black Africa. Mansa Musa I, the ancient legendary hero, is depicted as 'an imbecile' who hauls gold across the Sahara to Mecca, hoping to display the richness of his empire and himself to the rest of the world. The result of this 'moron journey', we are told, is the invasion of Africa by Arabs and Europeans, who probed for the discovery and the control of the source of the gold that was so ill-advisedly advertised to the world by Mansa Musa I (pp.62, 74). Although *Two Thousand Seasons* has flushed out of the annals of African history many of the celebrated legendary figures of Africa's past and present, many African critics still regard this work as a positive novel which projects a better future for Africa because Anoa predicts a muted hope for Africa - an emancipation after one thousand years of slavery. Thus, Dan Izevbaye asserts, in his 'Reality in The African Novel: Its Theory and Practice', that 'Where Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* almost reveres the past, Ouologuem's

Bound to Violence denigrates it and tramples on the hitherto respected heads of the ancestors' (1986:119). This view oversimplifies Armah's view of the past and 'the hitherto respected heads of the ancestors' whom his novel divests of their false grandeur and dismisses as 'morons'.

The disfigured fictive portrait of the famous ancient emperor crystallizes how the novel sets about to destroy and to reverse the mythical Golden Age of Africa. The text engages upon a monstrous counter-culture which rejects not only the Euro-Arab myths about Africa as expected, but also the Black myths about Africa. The anti-legend narrator's aversion to the marvellous deeds of the supernatural heroes is debunked by Christopher Caudwell who asserts in his *Illusion and Reality* (1946) that the original impulse of the communal wholeness of the old legends might have been adapted and deliberately adulterated by the ruling class. The result is that the powerless community plays the role of 'an exploited class and is tainted with the idiocy[12] of exploitation' (1946:41-42). Okpewho endorses this formulation when he declares that in *Two Thousand Seasons* Armah perceives the oral tradition in its present form as '... the degeneration of the oral tradition from a people's metaphysical enquiry (undertaken in an honest collective spirit) into the nature of things (mythology) to a base superstitious adoration (legend) of a god-king beneath whom the exploited and dehumanized folk grovel ...' (Okpewho, 1983b:10). The novel condemns the aesthetics of the supernatural heroism centred around fantasy and brigandry which the African legend has created:

> Children walked among us believing secretly there had been an age of giants and doers of great deeds now gone, and that these doers of great deeds had been their fathers'. They heard secret, nostalgic tales of a time when a brave man had no need to do the careful, steady work of planting, watching, harvesting, but could in one sudden, brilliant flash of violent energy capture from others all the riches he craved, then like a python lie lazy through the length of coming seasons, consuming his victim [sic] profit. (p.32)

This artistic purpose is self-evident in the novel's presentation of traditional African chiefs as 'parasites', 'perverts', and 'morons'. The saga retells Africa's racial flow of life from the dawn of history towards the present and the future. The novel's repudiation of Emperor Mansa Musa I is, therefore, extended to cover that of his heirs, the chiefs who had the first contact with the European imperialists. Thus, Mansa Musa's 'moronic pilgrimage' leads naturally to the text's intricate caricaturing of chiefs, symbolized by a catalogue of infamous kings - the microcosm of the centuries of the tyrannical rule created by African semi-divine warrior-kings. The list is topped by King Koranche, the most evil and the most idiotic king of the group:

> So among us the ostentatious cripples turned the honoured positions of caretakers into plumage for their infirm selves. Which shall we now choose to remember of the many idiocies our tolerance has supported? ... Let us finish speedily with their mention. The memory of these names is corrosive. Its poison sears our lips. Odunton, Bentum, Oko, Krobo, Jebi, Jonto, Sumui, Oburum, Ituri, Dube, Mununkum, Esibir, Bonto, Peturi, Topre, Tutu, Bonsu, and lately, Koranche. (pp.63-64)

The self-conscious listing of the evil and depraved kings, who again are taken from the whole continent - from the Islamic north (Peturi/Ituri) to Southern Africa (Dube) - is a creative ploy designed to evoke the view that the trend is continental and not only limited to the Akans. The narrator's attitude to traditional African chiefs - the custodians of Africa's moral and cultural purity - is eloquently revealed by the contemptuous tone of his voice. The narrator attempts to cleanse the moral murk in which the god-like kings have covered Africa by deploying a ritualized style structured around the profane. The reader gets the distinct impression that the narrator intends to purify the spiritual and physical rot with verbal rot - a creative ploy akin to the ritualistic carrier motif in which moral and spiritual filth is carried ritualistically at the end of the year by a chosen victim (Robin Horton, 1960:259). A graphic example of this is

the royal python ritual ceremony held every year in Afife (Ghana) - a ritual which cleanses accumulated offences of the year and engenders regeneration by reversing all taboos, including the ethical ones on profanity and totemic taboos. The demonic iconoclastic onslaught directed against the legendary heroes of the past and present is underscored by Derek Wright in his 'Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*'. Wright points out that Armah's 'avowedly anti-elitist standpoint shuns the griot's customary glorification of the matchless deeds of the past heroes, rejects the supernatural along with the superhuman and denies the narrator's single creative personality and domineering proprietorship over the events narrated' (1992:84). The classic example of this stylistic patterning is the hailstorm of verbal abuse and profanity which the text unleashes during the harem revolt against the desert predators:

> Hussein, twin brother of Hassan the Syphilitic. Hussein had long since given up the attempt to find a way for his phallus into any woman's genitals. His tongue was always his truest pathfinder.
>
> (p.21)

Since the slave kings are the inherent source of the moral muck which strangulates Armah's world, the novel gives them also a ritual bath of verbal rot akin to the physical ritual cleansing Ousmane Sembene's depraved hero is given when he is ritually assaulted with "smelly and yellow spittle" by "the vomit of the society", led by the famous beggar in *Xala* (1974:108-114)). In Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, we are told that 'The quietest king, the gentlest leader of the mystified, is criminal beyond the exercise of any comparison' (p.64). The most abrasive invective hurled at the traditional ruler is the attack on King Topre. The novel's ironic portrayal of King Topre, who, in his determination to preserve the purity of the royal family, refuses to copulate with any woman except his own sister, unveils this central concern. The purity of King Topre's blood and his sister's, which he has tried to keep from being tainted by an inferior

breed of men, is manifested by the rare "intelligence" of their first son, Prince Tutu:

> Tutu, the first son of that copulation, was an idiot; not like his mother, astounded into imbecility by Topre's heated insistence, but in his own right a pure, congenital fool. After Tutu there was Bonsu, his stupidities so monstrous and so well known it would be wasted breath repeating them. (p.66)

Armah's irreverent narratorial voice intimates that the fictional world of this novel is an unusual cosmos, ruled by 'congenital' imbeciles - a world running in a reverse order. The novel maintains that the chiefs have not only prepared the way for the derailment of contemporary Africa, but they are also said to be responsible for the institutionalization of slavery which was originally introduced by the Arabs. *Two Thousand Seasons* repeatedly maintains that slavery and chieftaincy are inseparably bonded together. This mystified relationship between the slave and the chief is illuminated by the most macabre and devastating satiric trope used in the novel:

> Have you not seen the fat ones, the hollow ones now placed above us? ... We have a vision of a slave man roaming the desert sand - a perfect image of our hollow chiefs today. Language he had not, not ours, and not his own. It had been voided out of him, his tongue cut out from his mouth. He pointed to the gaping cavity. Thinking he still had a soul, even mutilated, we imagined he was after sympathy. We were mistaken - he was pointing to the hole with pride. They had destroyed his tongue, they had put pieces of brass there to separate the lower jaw from the upper jaw. The slave thought the brass a gift. He communicated his haughty pride to us, indicating in the sand with precise remembrance when he had achieved each piece of brass, what amazing things he had been made to do in order to be given them. (p.7)

The image of the tongueless slave with a gaping cavity kept open by pieces of brass which the blind and naive slave treasures as precious gifts is brilliantly illuminated and reinforced by the symbol of the mask with the Ananse motif which Dr Earl Lynch, an African American character in Armah's *Why Are We So Blest?*, owns but fails to understand (p.32).

Two Thousand Seasons, like Armah's other novels, presents the metaphysical blindness of Africa's ruling elite as the root cause of Africa's perpetual suffering and that of the alien domination of the continent. The intensity of the blindness and the naivete revealed by this demonic image identifies the ancient chiefs and the institution of slavery as the focus of the novel. The chief and the slave are so close that *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers* suggest that one begets the other; but which of the two is the begetter, is deliberately cloaked in mystery. Through a systematic deployment of images of moral putrefaction and ironic reversals, the novel has succeeded in exposing traditional rulers, and the modern socialist, revolutionary rulers of Black Africa - the past and the present legendary heroes - as destructive, 'parasitic', 'imbeciles' whose destiny in life is dominated by a single powerful purpose: to indulge their 'crassest physical wants' (p.31). It goes on to say:

> Our chiefs, our leaders, they have bellies and they have tongues. Minds they do not have. That is the white destroyers' happiness; that is why the white destroyers will exhaust their long knowledge of murder to keep our rotten chiefs, our bloated leaders on top of us. *No one sold us but our chiefs and their hangers-on.* (p.146. my emphasis)

The novel holds 'our chiefs and their hangers-on' responsible for the sale of millions of Africans into slavery. This declaration is contrary to the traditional view of Afrocentric historians, who indict Arabs and Europeans for the expansion of the Arab slave trade across the Sahara and the European slave trade across the Atlantic. The reduction of human existence to physical gratification and pleasure, the narrator contends, has become life's supreme goal which is pursued by the ruling class and their hangers-on. It is suggested that African racial rites of passage have become lop-sided, centred around the belly and leaving the head famished and deformed like Dr Lynch's Ananse mask referred to above. *Two Thousand Seasons* maintains that Black racial history and heritage reveal centuries of blinding which has effectively blunted the African's perception of his real

world and destiny. The chiefs, the custodians of African heritage and history, are painted as dim-witted, in-breeding and impotent parasites dominated by criminal mentality and obsessed with self-deification. *Two Thousand Seasons* portrays the hereditary rule of chiefs as a rotten system of government in which the intelligent, the skilful, and the productive are ruled by 'those born mediocre' - 'the congenital fools' (p.66, 74). The omniscient narrator, who often intrudes to reveal the hidden thoughts of the characters to the reader, comments on and moralizes about the 'moronic' king, Koranche, thus:

> The king [Koranche] felt happy at the thought of Ngubane's destruction, and gratitude filled his heart when he contemplated the social power that had made it possible. Now life became clear again in his mind: *a conflict between the unjustly intelligent, the experts with their skill and their intelligence on one hand*, and on the other hand *those born mediocre*, those inferior through no fault of their own, *the hollow ones, the stupid ones, the uncreative ones*. (p.73-74, my emphasis)

The anti-traditional narrator, intent upon reversing the entire course of Africa's rites of passage resorts to the hyperbolic and caustic satiric tropes and modes in order to drive his message home. The novel portrays in revolting language the carnal descent of the legendary ancient rulers and their mentors, the Arabs. The first sexual pervert is King Jonto, who carves a glorious name for himself and the royal family by being acclaimed the greatest destroyer and the only king who sexually abuses young boys as well as animals:

> Destruction was his pleasure. In his gentlest moods he was a bloody lecher. From the unprompted craving of his soul he had a special enclosure built. In it he shut up not only selected animals but also virgins - girls as well as boys - chosen for his insatiate urge. (p.64).

It could be contended that sexual decay and debauchery which critics argue that *Two Thousand Seasons* presents as Arab imports into Africa the text suggests is native and deeply rooted within the indigenous elite. Hunter Brafo's father's sexual greed - the insatiable sexual craving of one of the

first progenitors of pre-Euro-Arab Africa - which drives the fifty-year old patriarch to the attempted murder of his son and his ward, Ajoa, discounts the perception that prehistoric Africa was mantled in moral purity. The novel suggests that the ancient moral depravity which permeates the ruling class ranges from the cradle of Africa's history to the present and the future. The novel intimates that the voracity of the sexual beast in man drives the ancient patriarchs to commit demonic acts of cruelty when their sexual desires are thwarted. King Koranche's satanic extermination of 'Ngubane the farming fundi', who dares to marry Idawa, who contemptuously rejects King Koranche's marriage offer, reinforces this insight:

> Ngubane the farming fundi had fallen to a beast. Beast unnamed, strangest of beasts indeed, that severed the dead man's genitals, stuffed them in his throat and threw the body in the river weighted with a rock.... (p.71)

The work thus presents a detailed fictional version of prehistoric Africa which completely negates the notion of the Golden Age in traditional Africa. That the kings of Euro-Arab colonial Africa are presented as being so evil and immoral that they could destroy anyone who came between them and their unquenchable sexual desires, suggests how decayed this world has become since the advent of the Arabs and the Europeans who prop up the corrupt and despotic indigenous rulers against their own people in order to achieve their own aims: the exploitation of the natural resources of Africa. *Two Thousand Seasons* continues its denigration of chiefs by showing how far the traditional rulers have sunk since the rule of the pre-colonial Africa's elected 'caretakers' and the reign of colonial African chiefs. The reader is told that King Koranche adulterates ancient rituals in order to make the most beautiful virgin girls of every initiation group available to the princes of the royal house. King Koranche's sudden introduction of a change into the ancient ritual dance does not fool the initiates:

> ... it was the king's wish that the girl left last within the middle circle should not choose a dancer among ourselves, but a special guest of honour he the king was bringing us. We did not have to wait to find out who this special creature was: the prince Bentum, renamed Bradford George, voided of his soul, had fled his white cripple of a wife and come home looking for beauty and goodness to sacrifice to his murdered soul. (p.92)

The trap which is set to ensnare the beautiful virgin initiate, Abena - like Brafo's father intended for Ajoa and King Koranche's for Idawa - is discovered by the victim who is a visionary, endowed with supreme native wit. Africa's seduction by a European ethos and the degeneration of her rituals and culture are symbolized by the destructive role of the supernatural and tyrannical kings. The novel's structure links the corrupt progenitors/caretakers - 'the ostentatious cripples' - of pre-Euro-Arab Africa with the slave-kings of Euro-Arab colonial Africa and the political notables of modern Africa.

The creative synthesizing of the three periods of Africa's servitude and tyranny is achieved by the text's manipulation of Kamuzu's portraiture and the symbol of the slave castle. The text's reconstruction of history is governed by its didactic and propagandistic orientation. Hence, the past is reinterpreted in terms of the present. The text's characterization of Kamuzu illuminates this perception. Kamuzu's portrayal is a brilliant creative ploy designed to reinforce the view that Africa's past foibles beget the present moral and political derailment of the continent. Equally innovative is the text's symbolic exploitation of the name, Kamuzu[13], which symbolizes the political culture of contemporary Africa. In Kamuzu, the novel aesthetically unifies the repeated historical weaknesses of pre-colonial, colonial, and contemporary Africa, and suggests that the present decay is a natural growth or progression from that of pre-Euro-Arab Africa. Kamuzu, we are told, joins the initiates and Isanusi in fighting against the European slave

traders who live in the castle only because he has been cheated out of his expected profit from a deal with the king of Poano, King Atobra. Isanusi retells us Kamuzu's experience with the Poano royalty - why 'the bitterest enmity runs in his [Kamuzu's] blood against the princes of Poano and their parasites':

> Kamuzu once helped Atobra, king of Poano, his three princes and his parasites at court to deceive, capture and then sell a large number of slaves to the white destroyers, only to have the king, the princes and the other parasites hold back from him his agreed share of the price paid for women and men. Kamuzu's anger against the king, the princes and the parasites is that kind of anger, anger with nothing pure, nothing good in it. Kamuzu does not hate the enslavement of our people. What he hates is his own exclusion from the profits of the trade. (p.159-160)

The vision being projected here is that of the endless cycle of betrayals Africa has been subjected to by her notables. Kamuzu's aim in joining the initiates in their fight against slavery is directed purely by selfish motives. He symbolizes the class of the past and the present ruling elite, composed of opportunists and traitors who are guided solely by the desire to amass material wealth and to achieve personal grandeur. The protean narrator who speaks here under the guise of the anti-slavery initiates, led by Isanusi, reveals the parodic mode of the text. The relevant narrative is cited in full because it illuminates the novel's ingenious handling of the parodic technique as an act of recreation and as an instrument of criticism:

> Thirty of us went with Isanusi: for Kamuzu's angry chieftain friend, the fabled one thirsty for hot blood, he was to be Isanusi himself. Fantastic we look in our special robes - robes capacious... Incredible we looked, but none more amazing to sight than Isanusi himself. *Hau! What an imbecility always is the high ceremony of state and royalty...*
>
> Is it not enough just to say Isanusi was dressed with all the foolish magnificence of royalty? ... On his head he wore a high, gilded hat, woven in imitation of a crown. A rainbow would have turned white with envy to behold his long robe.... Fool's gold glittered hoarser than the red; a deep, false blue struggled to push the brighter colours into obscurity ... But the most

> unashamedly royal adornment was this: pieces of broken metal, even bits from some white destroyer's shattered mirror, all were sewn in patches into *the screaming pattern of the gown proclaiming brilliant royalty*. That was hardly all. On the wearer's ankles small, high-pitched bells tinkled with every step he took. *Nor did Isanusi forget to add to his accoutrement a long fly-whisk, indispensable tool of all flyblown leadership.* (pp.162-163, my emphasis)

This narrative embodies the different historical symbols of self-deification which have been used by African rulers and notables from ancient times to the present. The neo-traditional narrator, intent on drawing the reader's attention to the need to go into an elaborate description of Isanusi's grotesque 'royal' robe, deploys a self-conscious narrative technique, aimed at destroying the reader's illusion of the text's imitation of reality: 'Is it not enough just to say Isanusi was dressed with all the foolish magnificence of royalty?' In other words, the narrator is determined to give us the bizarre visual image of the ostentatious attributes of African traditional royalty. A careful textual analysis of this innovative narrative technique reveals a number of interesting insights. The phrase the 'angry chieftain friend, the fabled one thirsty for hot blood' parodies the legendary warrior heroes of traditional Africa whom the novel presents as empty ostentatious beings who conceal their hollowness under grandiose worthless praise names and bloodthirstiness. Isanusi's robe itself mimics the traditional ceremonial gear of the Akan chiefs. With the fastidiousness of an accomplished parodist, the narrator tells us that Isanusi, the seer, masquerading as a chieftain, 'wore a high, gilded hat, woven in imitation of a crown'. The text's description of the hat projects a carbon copy of the golden crown-like hats traditionally worn by Akan paramount chiefs. The irreverent narrator then seals his sarcastic attack on the ostentation and self-glorification of the ancient chiefs of Africa with a sneer: 'A rainbow would have turned white with envy to behold his long robe' (p.162). The intimation that

royalty is driven by a craving for personal grandeur to inflate their hollow image to weird proportions is debunked by the hideous composition of the 'royal robe' which is crafted by Isanusi. We are told that Isanusi's royal 'accoutrement' is studded with 'pieces of broken metal, even bits from some white destroyer's shattered mirror, all were sewn in patches into *the screaming pattern of the gown proclaiming brilliant royalty*' (p.163, my emphasis).

So far my analysis exposes only how the text parodies the past political culture of the African chiefs and their addiction to flamboyance and self-grandeur. The narrative's vision of contemporary Africa is yet to come. The sentence 'Nor did Isanusi forget to add to his accoutrement a long fly-whisk, indispensable tool of all flyblown leadership' (p.163) graphically links the past to the present. In modern Africa most Africa leaders use the 'fly-whisk' to enhance their symbolic political power, their divine omnipotence and charisma. It is this bizarre political tradition of magnifying the self-image and the political image with an object traditionally designed for killing common house-flies that the narrator is, obviously, ridiculing when he scornfully describes the fly-whisk as the 'indispensable tool of all *flyblown* leadership'. That the narrator is consciously leading the reader to connect the past historical foibles of ancient god-like kings with the follies of contemporary African leaders is also seen in his manipulation of praise singing and praise names.

The obsession of the kings of pre-colonial Africa with hero-worshipping panegyrics and high-sounding praise epithets, also condemned in Mofolo's *Chaka* and Plaatje's *Mhudi*, is extensively satirized in this novel. The following praise song is a remarkable example of how praise poetry can be attuned to satire. Its artistry lies in its inclusion of actual praise names of contemporary leaders of Africa:

> We took turns composing, took turns singing the most extravagant praise songs to Kamuzu's vanity ... What spurious praise names did we not invent to lull Kamuzu's buffoon spirit?
>
> Osagyefo!
> Kantamanto!
> Kabiyesi!
> Sese!
> Mwenyenguvu!
> Otumfuo!
>
> Dishonest words are the foods of rotten spirits. We filled Kamuzu to bursting with his beloved nourishment. (p.170-171)

The genius of Armah's style lies in the fact that within the predominantly contemporary praise names of African leaders are embedded two praise names from Africa's ancient past - 'Kabiyesi' (Yoruba) and 'Otumfuo' (Ashanti). This device suggests that the tradition of flattery and self-glorification which characterizes the legendary tradition of the supernatural and god-like kings as exemplified by Sundiata, Emperor Mansa Musa I, Asantehene Agyeman Prempeh I, Shaka, Mzilikazi and others is faithfully emulated by contemporary African leaders. The first two praise names were used by the late Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana; 'Sese' is President Mobutu's praise name and 'Mwenyenguvu', which is a modern Swahili concoction, literally meaning "the Owner of Strength", is projected to caricature the East African political leaders like Julius Nyerere, Jomo Kenyatta and Milton Obote. The novel intimates that the past is frozen in the present. In a more elaborately parodied praise song, modelled on the Shakan *izibongo*, the narrator further ridicules praise singing. The reader is told '... we chanted more elaborate praises ..../ Osagyefo, courageous, skilled one who arrives to pulverize the enemy just when the enemy is exulting in imminent victory..../ Mzee, wisdom's own keeper' (p.172). It is interesting to note that 'Mzee', which literally means "Old Man", was the late President Jomo Kenyetta's praise name. This perception is persuasively presented by Ali A. Mazrui.

In his 'On Poet-Presidents and Philosopher-Kings', Mazrui contends that 'many of the first rulers of post-colonial African states' - '*philosopher-kings* or *philosophizing rulers*' - 'did view themselves as serious thinkers as well as neo-monarchical founding fathers' (1990:13). The African leaders project themselves like 'kings'. It is further argued that even *literary presidents* such as Agostino Neto of Angola and Leopold Senghor of Senegal have not been able to practise the humane and communal ideal they project in their poetry. Mazrui concludes that intellectual and highly educated African rulers are not in any way 'more benign towards opponents that rulers regarded as intellectually crude or primitive'. This intimates, ironically, that African writers (Mazrui included), who are now busy criticizing the African ruling elite may, if given the opportunity to rule Africa, become despots just like their predecessors.

Sam Ogundele suggests that supernatural kings like Shaka anticipate the pseudo-divine modern African rulers who ape the god-like pre-colonial African legendary kings. Thus in his 'Orality versus Literacy in Mazisi Kunene's *Emperor Shaka the Great*', Ogundele says that 'It is interesting how much Kunene's Shaka corresponds with the mystique of the semi-divine monarchs the several post-independence African leaders tried to build around themselves' (1992:22). Borrowing from Mazrui's earliest comment on this theme, which is discussed in his essay, 'The Monarchical Tendency in African Political Culture' (in *Violence and Thought* ... 1969:206-207), Ogundele declares that 'As itemised and analyzed by Ali A. Mazrui, this process of political mystification and personality-cult building combined at least four elements of political style: the quest for aristocratic effect; the personalisation of authority; the sacralisation of authority; and the quest for a royal historical identity' (1992:22). In his 'Dissidence and the African Writer: Commitment or Dependence' Oyekan Owomoyela also unmasks why 'such nationalist pioneers as Nanmdi Azikiwe, Kwame Nkrumah, Milton Obote and Leopold

Senghor' (op. cit.) thought it fit to veil themselves in the image of the fabulous god-like kings of pre-colonial Africa:

> The educated leaders of the African revolution were, of course, aware that the African masses had not been so affected by colonialism as to adopt European attitudes in place of the traditional, therefore, that they must be wooed with traditional inducements to accept leadership that did not derive from traditional symbols of power - chieftaincy titles and the regalia that went with, for example - and affected an adeptness in employing traditional strategies of communication and persuasion.
>
> (Owomoyela, 1981:85)

This syncretic approach to the maximization of political power worked so well for the 'old guards' that it has become, Ouologuem argues in *Bound to Violence*, the golden rule for becoming life-president in Africa. The sneering attitude of *Two Thousand Seasons* to this political culture of perpetuating the ancient legendary myths, clothed in eternal tyranny, is unveiled by Owomoyela's insight.

Another technique which is deployed to project the view that the political culture of tyranny and self-indulgence, which characterizes pre-Euro-Arab Africa, is emulated by both colonial and post-independent Africa is the symbol of the slave castle. The novel intimates that there is no difference between the treatment which is meted out to the ruled in pre-Euro-Arab Africa and that which is meted out to them by colonial and post-independent Africa. The work conveys this vision through its symbolic manipulation of the slave castle. Of Armah's five novels, it is only in *The Healers* that the slave castle, the symbol of European colonization and the slave trade, is not symbolically exploited.

By making the self-seeking Kamuzu occupy the slave castle after its capture and the killing of the European governor, the work intimates that the defeat of the Europeans and the capture of the slave fort does not change anything. The victory over the Europeans in the fort does not end the cycle of slavery, tyranny, and destruction; it only changes the

"colour" of these vices. It leads to Kamuzu's self-installation in the captured slave castle and his symbolic replacement of the slain European governor as exemplified by his inheriting all the governor's leftovers, including his bloated coloured woman, coupled with his fatal attempts to become a black carbon copy of the man he has helped the initiates and Isanusi to destroy:

> Kamuzu felt the call deep in his spirit to help himself to the departed destroyer's leftovers, and he did. Not only did he take the used woman for his own; he also coveted the dead white destroyer's servants, his clothes, everything he thought could make him more like a destroyer. (p.170)

The text explodes Kamuzu's transparently selfish motive by referring to it satirically as a calling. Africa's seduction by the European ethos permeates all Armah's five novels. This craving for the alien culture is, *Two Thousand Seasons* intimates, the root cause of past and present African rulers' propensity to collaborate with alien powers in order to exploit their own people and reduce them to servitude. Kamuzu's desperate efforts to ape the white governor reveal the general degradation of the African race from aboriginal communal wholeness and solidity of 'blackness' towards hollow 'whiteness'. The pathological striving by the slave to be like his former master assumes a central place in the novel. Kamuzu's behaviour also reinforces the destiny of African leaders and their world. The novel suggests that the racial odyssey of the African and his world will continue to lead either to the slave ship or the slave factory until Anoa's prophecy is completely fulfilled. Similarly, the defeat of the notorious King Koranche does not stop the destructive wheel of the chiefs. All events in the novel have built-in repercussions which negate all actions. The novel maintains, through this symbolic patterning of the slave castle, that there has neither been any emancipation nor birth of a new Africa. What we have is a cycle of abortions. The difference between the former and latter is that 'the new slave trader' conceals his true identity behind his blackness. Only the

self-illuminated and lunatic seers can see through this wall of veils and identify the ugly reality beneath. This interpretation is powerfully conveyed in *The Washington Post*:

> Since independence in Africa, government has been seen as the personal fiefdom a leader uses to accumulate wealth for himself, his family, his clan. He cannot be subjected to criticism by anyone, and everything he says is final. The apex of this notion of owning government is the idea of a life president like Hastings Banda of Malawi.
>
> Once they replaced the colonial rulers, they wanted to become just like them. They wanted to be all-powerful and omnipresent. We just replaced white faces with black faces.
>
> (*The Washington Post*, Sept 9, 1991:A20, cited in Ayittey, 1992:9-10)

Two Thousand Seasons projects an endless cycle of ironic reversals and a series of seduction by appearances. The complex web of ironies of inversion which dominates this work illuminates the irreversible physical and moral degeneration which permeate the novel. It is interesting to note that every action in *Two Thousand Seasons*, whether adverse or favourable, prepares the way for further enslavement, destruction and moral degeneration as predicted by Anoa. One of the most interesting examples of this ironic inversion is the flight of Anoa's people from the desert predators and their arrival at Anoa, a physical paradise, watered by a network of rivers, waterfalls, lakes, and all shapes and forms of water - the antithesis of the barren desert they have escaped from. This illusion of paradise and the notion of the mythical promised land is quickly dispelled by the omniscient narrator who sees the future: 'The sand [desert] had brought us woe. Water, this same living, flowing water of the river itself, *water* would bring worse deaths to us' (p.58).

The huge situational irony projected by the text is the fact that Anoa's people associate the desert with death and barrenness while water symbolizes fruition and regeneration. The life-generating physical beauty of Anoa - 'water hanging clear, water too open to hide the veined rock underneath,

water washing pebbles blue and smooth black, yellow like some everlasting offspring of the moon, water washing sand, water flowing to quiet meetings with swift Esuba, to the broad, quiet Su Tsen, river washing you, Anoa, water washing you' - (pp.56-57) suggests regeneration and rebirth - an intimation of the end of the woes and enslavement perpetrated by the Arab 'predators'. It is clearly evident that Armah designs a cyclic structure for *Two Thousand Seasons* in order to reinforce the cycle of betrayals, servitude, destruction and tyranny symbolized by Anoa's prophecy. The futile cycle of enslavement and destruction is repeatedly reaffirmed throughout *Two Thousand Seasons* by means of ironic twists, paradoxes, and narratorial intrusions: 'True it is, we have known other sources of despair: the knowledge that a people may flee predators only to find destroyers, escape whiteness coming from the desert only to collide with worse whiteness coming from the sea' (p.203). The narrator maintains that there is no escape for Anoa's people: 'We came away from the *desert*'s edge thinking we were escaping the causes of our disintegration. The causes running deepest were twin: among us had arisen a division between producers and parasites.... We came from the desert's edge thinking we were fleeing ruin, but its deepest causes we carried with us to new places' (pp.58-59). The wheel of physical destruction and spiritual decay is fated to roll on. The process of moral putrescence and violence generated by slavery as portrayed by the novel and symbolized by Anoa's prophecy are, like the liminal period in initiation, inevitable. No one can transcend Anoa's prophecy. If we pull all the narrative strands of the ironic reversals together, we get an intricate web of cycles which begin to look like a spiral. All actions and movements in the novel lead to only one destination: nowhere!

The initiates' victory on board the slave ship and their homecoming as exemplified by Dovi's experience on arrival in Anoa do not project any notion of emancipation. The entire experience is a green-horn initiation. The text projects two

Anoas: the ideological and the physical. The first Anoa is a physical homecoming of an initiate who has not yet achieved self-illumination after going through the ordeal of running the slave circuit. He stands to be caught and sold again. The second Anoa is an ideological homecoming to Anoa by an initiate who has successfully achieved self-awareness which enables him to identify all the traps designed to ensnare him and he does not commit Dovi's blunder of being caught and sold again by his own relatives who have become middlemen for the slave traders. That a mere return to Anoa is not a victory because 'their real enemy, the eternal middlemen among their own kind, are merely waiting to sell them off again' is brilliantly debunked by Wole Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976:113). This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that on their arrival at Anoa, the initiates discover that King Koranche and the European slave traders have established a full blown slave market. This critique, therefore, queries the interpretation which perceives the return of the initiates to Anoa after their successful revolt within the slave ship as the ultimate freedom predicted by Anoa.

Like the initiates' later destruction of the slave castle, the escape from the slave ship and physical arrival in Anoa cannot reverse the wheel of tyranny and slavery. Neither does the defeat of the notorious King Koranche stop the destructive cycle of the chiefs, for his retarded son, Bentum, white-washed and renamed George Bradford, is imposed upon the people by the European colonizers as an imperialist stooge masquerading as the king of Anoa. Thus all events in the novel have built-in boomerangs which negate their actions. The illusory victory of the destruction of the slave castle is negated when it is rebuilt through forced and slave labour. These ironic twists confirm how all the achievements by the initiates have been neutralized and the state of affairs has returned to what it had always been: a world ruled by 'moronic' chiefs who sell their people into slavery.

There is the suggestion that the politics of villainy and megalomania generated by tyranny, slavery, and slave culture worsens with the passage of time.

The symbol of the slave castle naturally leads to the novel's elaborate delineation of the Middle Passage. The most enigmatic episode, which reveals the narrator's view of slavery and the slave trade, is its handling of the manner in which initiates, who have gone through a traditional initiation ceremony designed to prepare them for life, end up in the bowels of a European slave ship through the betrayal of King Koranche, the expected defender of traditional heritage and racial purity. *Two Thousand Seasons* recreates the bottomless pit of the trails of the Middle Passage by subjecting the initiates to an actual experience in the corrosive belly of a slave ship. The novel intimates that although in contemporary Africa physical slavery is a thing of the past, covert forms of servitude and the slave mentality live on. The various forms of achievement and victory presented by the novel are also projected as nothing but illusions of the ultimate freedom which is prophesied by Anoa.

This view is conveyed and enacted through Abena's ritualistic initiation dance of love which is expected to lead to procreation. Although Abena, who is one of the women visionaries in this novel, is located in the present, she divines both the past and the future. Like Ama Nkroma in *The Healers*, Naita in *Why Are We So Blest?*, Naana in *Fragments*, and the Teacher in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Abena's ritual dance is pregnant with ancient wisdom and insights like the *Afa* divination[14]. Like the Prophetess Anoa, Abena is endowed with all-seeing eyes akin to those of Legba[15], the messenger deity (whose European counterpart is Hermes), and the 'master of crossroads', who sits astride the divine and the human world. The insights conveyed by the

dance are communicated through the medium of icons - visual signs dramatized by body movements and facial expressions:

> To the heavy, slow beat she had requested *Abena did a dance like the dance of birth, the dance of awakening, but as if the birth she danced would be a reluctant birth, a possible abortion, even.* For though Abena had more than enough time and supple skill in abundance she never carried the dance to its proper end. *Always when the end came near,* with an imperceptible change in her movement *Abena returned to the beginning, to the slow, heavy, mournful steps of blindness ignorant of sight, the steps of flesh not yet inspired.* She chose an arbitrary end when, staring fixedly at us, *she shook like a person surprised in some sly trap, shook with a fury that seemed aimed at us ... and then abruptly she halted her unfinished dance.* (p.107, my emphasis)

The verbalization of Abena's initiation dance speaks for itself. But its coded mystical icons are nothing but meaningless body movements to the initiates who have not yet attained self-illumination. They are infected, the text intimates, with dim-wittedness induced by the slave culture. The ritual dance also predicts what awaits the neophytes in the cavernous belly of the slave ship. The ironic reversal of their initiation, which is likened to an expected birth which ends in abortion, is epitomized by Abena's dance - a symbolic configuration which re-enacts her previous verbal warning to the naive initiates. But like the verbal warning, its insight is blocked by an ancient wall of veils and is not understood. It also presages the ironic cycle of reversals this world is fated to go through - the whirlwind of mirages and the illusions Africa is ordained to suffer before the 'Beautyful Ones' are finally born. The huge promises which end in disillusionment; the rosy picture of paradise which independence will shower on man and his world; the glorious conception of a world about to give birth to a child with magical powers. The 'slow, heavy, mournful steps' of the dancer suggest that delivery might not be easy. It might 'be a reluctant birth, a possible abortion.'

Let us now probe the initiates' experience and escape from the slave ship - the event which is erroneously perceived by

some critics as the final emancipation promised by Anoa. This episode illustrates what the narrator perceives as Africa's naivete, symbolized by cycles of betrayals and illusions. Though Armah's unfinished saga indicts the Europeans and the Arabs for propping up the indigenous slave-kings against their own people and for deploying imperialist stratagems in making the African believe that 'He has no culture, no civilization, no long historical past', to borrow from Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967:34), it castigates also the African, the victim, for his naive acceptance of the colonial myth that the African 'is not a man' (Fanon, 1967:8). Fanon's conceptualization of the trauma of slavery and colonization echoes the novel's didactic orientation:

> At the risk of arousing resentment of my colored brothers, I will say that the black is not a man. There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinary sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born.
>
> (Fanon, 1967:8)

The corrosive power of the pathological collapse of 'non-being' has only one cure: to become white; at least to look white. The feeling of 'non-being' and allowing this pseudo-self to usurp the real being can only stem from structural flaws within the Black world. Like Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* or like the anonymous protagonist in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the Blackman must bear the responsibility for being fooled into joining 'an existential race' which leads to servitude and invisibility. The novel contends that the *Abibiman* must blame himself for swallowing Prospero's 'water with berries' like Shakespeare's Caliban and becoming permanently enslaved by the European ethos. The initiates ignore Isanusi's advice and fall for King Koranche's trap baited with "shiny gifts", and a "sumptuous" European feast on board the slave ship:

> Further, the king wanted us to know he had thought of a sort of gift for us: the feast at the initiation's end would this season be the first of its kind, entirely different from any there had ever been among our people. He had prevailed upon the white men his friends to call

> us aboard their ship. We were to be the first black people in the world to feast with the white strangers as their guests and *to get gifts of appreciation from them at the ending of our youth.* (pp.105-106, my emphasis)

The 'two thousand seasons' of the agonizing cycle of the Middle Passage tribulations that Anoa predicts and which this world has been struggling to transcend since the beginning of its racial odyssey, is about to close in on the initiates. They have closed their eyes to the inner warnings of their native psyche and wit and must pay dearly for this metaphysical blindness. They turn deaf ears to the intuitive warnings of Abena:

> What were we going to the feast to celebrate when the integral way of our ancestors had been so forgotten, when the feasting has become an end in itself, a senseless gorging? Or did we not see the form of the feast had grown stupid? The ritual feast was now to take place on the white people's ship, vessel of destruction, merely because the chief had a whim. (p.106)

The majority of the initiates are projected like 'insiders' whose native wit has been blunted or 'insiders' who have no 'passwords' to the hidden meanings of Africa's sacred grove. Even the omniscient seer, Isanusi's advice has failed to pierce through the veil of blindness and naivete:

> If you knew who you were ... you would accept no invitations from black men who call white people friends. Such unnatural friendships are fed by bloody interests. You live to be their victim. (p.106)

It appears Isanusi is right: only through the baptism of agonized suffering can true self-illumination be achieved. Armah's protagonists, and they include his corporate one in this novel, are unwittingly engaged in a green-horn initiation which ushers in nothing except self-illumination. The fall of the initiates to King Koranche's deception unmasks how easy it is to enslave a world that is derailed from its indigenous ethos and which is nurtured in alien culture and local tyranny. This scene also confirms a number of thematic formulations: the responsibility of the rulers in the institutionalization of slavery; the role of the ancient

chiefs in the degeneration of Africa's rituals and heritage; and Africa's seduction by European culture and its lifestyle. The preoccupation of *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers* with slavery and the role of the indigenous rulers in its institutionalization is debunked by Arhin's view on the pervasive effect of slavery in pre-European and contemporary Akan society, particularly Asante, the pillar of institutionalized slavery in pre-colonial and colonial Ghana. Arhin asserts that:

> The free born had the chance of occupying royal stools, even if they were only those of lineage headships. First-generation slaves, whether war captives, *nnonum*, or purchased, *nnonkofo*, could not occupy even minor headships of palace associations. The *nnonkofo*, in particular, had the *disadvantage of tribal marks which, since they evoked contempt*, would diminish the effectiveness of their authority ... One may observe *in Asante villages, even today, that there is contempt, though concealed, for the descendants of slaves:* concealed because it is well known that it is forbidden by Asante indigenous law for people outside the lineage of the nominal slave owner to refer to the slave origin of the descendants of slaves[16] But while explicit reference to slave origins is forbidden, and rarely occurs, *it is clear from funeral ceremonies that slaves are regarded as belonging to a separate category of people. They are buried outside the burial grounds of the free descent groups;* and the groups of official mourners do not include as many allied family groups as one finds in the case of the free-born (Rattray, 1929:44). *The segregation of the deceased slaves from deceased free-born in the burial place clearly shows the marginality of slave descendants to Asante society;* and also that their "absorption" into the lineages of their owners was superficial.
>
> (Arhin, 1983:11-12, my emphasis)

The ritual facial marking of the slaves to identify them from the free-born and the contempt this draws from the society confirm the debilitating effects of indigenous slavery in Africa. The reference to the segregation of deceased free-born and deceased slaves who are interred outside the burial grounds of the free-born in present day Asante villages - the hollowness, the hypocrisy of royalty coupled with the demonic exploitation of humanity which the despotic culture of slavery evokes - reveal the thrust of Armah's fictional

the work is curiously similar to Turner's 'communitas' - the relationship of initiates under the period of 'liminality' (1969:95-96).[6] Anoa's prophecy is the deep embedded structure which shapes and informs the novel. This, however, does not suggest that there is only one basic interpretation or version offered by the text.

The text's portrait of the Black African is similar to that of Murano[7] in Wole Soyinka's *The Road* (1965:44-45). The novel intimates that, like Soyinka's Murano, the Black African is a stereotyped threshold, suspended together with his world in a state of transition. In *Two Thousand Seasons* this state is generated by Anoa's prophecy of 'two thousand seasons' of slavery. The inhabitants of Anoa's mythic and allegorized world could be compared to the *pupae* which have no control over the liminal period nature has ordained for them before they can become moths (Turner, 1967:94). This study, therefore, questions those interpretations which perceive the various successful operations against enemies of the larger community in the novel as the 'final emancipation' or 'victory' promised by Anoa's prophecy, for *Two Thousand Seasons* 'is an unfinished chronicle of Africa's servitude' (Larson, 1974:117). This means that the period of 'two thousand seasons' - the 'liminal period of transition' described by Anoa - has not, within the novel's time frame, come to an end. To suggest that 'The Beautyful Ones' are finally born, therefore, amounts to a misreading of Armah's novel.

Armah's epic deconstruction - his most unconventional novel - is so plagued by extreme and contradictory reviews that sometimes it is difficult to accept the fact that the apparently irreconcilable critical evaluations are about the same text. The deconstructed historical experience of prehistoric and existential contemporary Africa presented by this text is rejected by many critics. The most prominent among these are Bernth Lindfors (1980), Kirsten Holst

Petersen (1976), Simon Simonse (1982), Charles R. Larson (1974) and Chinua Achebe (1982). The intensity of Lindfors's distaste for the historical consciousness presented by *Two Thousand Seasons* is revealed by the preponderance of the highly emotive words which dominate his article, 'Armah's Histories' (1980). The social vision projected by *Two Thousand Seasons* is curtly dismissed by Lindfors as 'a cartoon history' which 'offers' nothing but a 'negation of negation' instead of 'a positive vision'. The novel's re-interpretation of African historical and contemporary experience, Lindfors further declares, is the '... kind of xenophobic oversimplification which used to be found in B-grade films manufactured in Hollywood during the Second World War ....' Lindfors's diatribe is also directed at the novel for replacing the African 'usable historical myth' with 'the dangerous kind of lie that Frantz Fanon used to call a "mystification"' (Lindfors, 1982:90).

Simon Simonse's 'African Literature Between Nostalgia and Utopia' (1982) also contends that the novel lacks historical realism. Simonse argues that '... we find Armah evoking an African utopia that is far removed from actual historical reality' (1982:483). The novel's concept of history is also attacked by Derek Wright in his article, 'Orality in the African Historical Novel: Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* and Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*' (1988), for being 'theoretical and imprecise' (1988:99). Wright adds, and rightly too, that the novel's celebration of the 'aesthetics of communal ethos' which recommends the 'total rejection of family and kin urged upon Dovi' is 'highly un-African' (1988:100).

The negative criticism which castigates the novel's presentation of pre-Euro-Arab Africa as 'a Garden of Eden' is closely related to the view that its racial retrieval amounts to 'a return to Africa's pristine values' - i.e. 'negritude reborn'. Again Lindfors sets the pattern by asserting that

Armah's social vision is 'a philosophy of paranoia, an anti-racist racism - *in short negritude reborn*' (1982:90). This perception is endorsed by both Atta Britwum (1975) and Eustace Palmer (1981). Britwum's 'Hero-Worshipping in the African Novel' (1975), which offers a superficial analysis of the work and traces the novel's lack of 'historical realism' to Armah's failure to ground his text on 'Marxism-Leninism', dismisses *Two Thousand Seasons* as 'Negritude all over again.' Britwum concludes that Armah's novel offers nothing but a 'Sentimental vision, completely at variance with historical reality' (1975:15). Besides Britwum's rejection of the text for being artistically unrealistic, Palmer's 'Negritude Rediscovered: A Reading of the Recent Novels of Armah, Ngugi, and Soyinka' (1981) defines negritude writers as writers who 'sought to glorify and idealize traditional life' (1981:2). Using this as his working definition, Palmer classifies Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* as a negritude work. Palmer, however, adds a concluding qualification which negates his thesis:

> ... this exercise in racial retrieval, this return to origins, is part of the strategy for the transformation of modern society. It is much more therefore than a complacent, self-regarding idealization of blackness and black culture.... The ultimate target therefore, is not so much the white man, as the case with Negritude, as black men and contemporary black society. The retrieval of these pristine African values is not the end, merely the means.
>
> (Palmer, 1981:11)

The novel's presentation of pre-Euro-Arab Africa as a world without hereditary rulers and which is ruled only by 'elected caretakers' is vehemently repudiated by both Lindfors and Wright as the most distorted feature of the novel's visionary reconstruction of pre-Euro-Arab Africa. Lindfors declares that in Armah's '*legendary*'[8] prehistory of Ujamaa' (1980:86; my emphasis) 'rulers did not exist; the communities were acephalous, completely democratic ...' (Lindfors, 1980:89). Wright endorses Lindfors's critical viewpoint when he argues that the text's portrayal of the notion of the 'kingless' Akan society is historically inaccurate, for 'acephalous

communalism seems to have more to do with the Igbo than the monarchical Akan ...' (Wright, 1989:227).

The narrative and the stylistic patterning also has its share of the critical searchlight. Directing its critical stricture at the style, Kirsten Holst Petersen's '"The new way": Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*' (1976) attacks the novel's cocktail style. Petersen asserts that 'A pseudo-poetic pompous style, obviously meant to lend grandeur to the subject, does not improve matters' (1976:334). The work's experimental style is further questioned by Wright, who criticises the text's contrived griot-like style:

> In Armah's imitative version of griotature, oral in conception but literary in expression, the passage between forms is not assisted by an erratic and unhappy assortment of styles, ranging from the oracular and invocatory to the popular and idiomatically American.... Armah strains to reproduce an illusion of orality and, specifically, of vatic utterance through a formidable battery of rhetorical questions, lamentations and exclamations ("Hau"), not to mention some frenzied alliteration....
>
> (Wright, 1989:228)

Apart from Lindfors's critical invective, one of the most blunt dismissals of the novel comes from Chinua Achebe. Achebe claims in Karel L. Morell's *In Person: Achebe, Awoonor, and Soyinka* (1975) that *Two Thousand Seasons* 'is *a complete failure*'. Achebe then adds that 'It is [a] *fantasy*, but there is a certain logic to fantasy and I don't accept this one ...' (1975:13-15).

Most of the critics appear to be unanimous on one crucial point: that *Two thousand Seasons* portrays prehistoric Africa as *a non-competitive and non-violent paradise.* According to Lindfors and Petersen, the novel represents the prehistoric Black world as 'a Garden of Eden' (Lindfors 1982:95) enveloped in a 'prelapsarian bliss' (Petersen 1976:333). The reading of *Two Thousand Seasons*, which perceives Armah's visionary reconstruction of prehistoric Africa as 'a Garden of Eden' is further echoed by Christophe Dailly's 'The Coming

of Age of the African Novel' (1984). Dailly asserts that 'All features of pre-colonial Africa pictured in Armah's novel foster happiness ...' (Dailly, 1984:120). And like all other critics who misread Armah's work, Dailly cites 'the peace of that fertile time' (p.10) passage to support the paradise view.

Larson's (1974:119) short review article on *Two Thousand Seasons*, already cited, adds another dimension to the negative critical strictures on the novel. Larson interprets the cessation of the serialization of the novel by 'the Ghanaian Daily Graphic' (Armah, 1978:10) not only as evidence of the African readership's endorsement of the European critical rejection of the novel, but also as proof of Armah's failure as a writer: '*Ayi Kwei Armah is now trapped ... His intellectual growth has thrown him into a state worse than that of his characters. He has become a literary askari, writing for colons*' (Larson, 1974:119; emphasis mine).

This study discounts the negative evaluations of *Two Thousand Seasons* which present the novel as either 'a complete failure' (Achebe, 1975) or 'a cartoon history' (Lindfors, 1982) and argues that *Two thousand Seasons* is not as worthless in literary terms as some critics claim. Rand Bishop's flattering comment in his '*The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*: Armah's First Five Novels' (1982) challenges the critical invectives on the two novelistic histories:

> Just as after *The Beautyful Ones*, African literature would no longer be able to excoriate only the colonizer, after *Two Thousand Seasons* no longer would it be able to ignore the major event of the past five hundred years of African history - slavery - and its debilitating effects that reach insidiously into the late twentieth century, long after its abolition, long after the advent of political independence.... Taken together with the fifth work, *The Healers*, this pair of novels represents an exciting new development that sets Armah apart from the rest of his contemporaries.
>
> (Bishop, 1982:532-533)

Another Africanist who perceives something positive in Armah's novelistic history is Lazarus. Unlike Lindfors' and Achebe's total rejection of the text, Lazarus asserts that 'Measured against Armah's first three novels ... the central achievement of *Two Thousand Seasons* might be said to consist formally in its embrace of the idiom of orature and ... in its formulation of resistance as a collective practice' (Lazarus, 1990:221).

The bulk of the critical corpus which challenges the virulent rejection of Armah's fourth novel is made of African critics. Some of these critics take issue with the diatribes against Armah's work. The most eloquent of these are Chidi Amuta (1981;1989) and Kofi Anyidoho (1981-82; 1986). Amuta, in his *The Theory of African Literature* (1989), postulates that 'colonialist criticism' which Chinua Achebe condemns in his work, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (1988:46-61) and which is eloquently reaffirmed by many African writers, still permeates Eurocentric criticism of African literary texts. Amuta claims to have demystified the concealed motives behind Lindfors's 'colonialist criticism' of Armah's novelistic histories. According to Amuta, *Two Thousand Seasons* is negatively reviewed by Eurocentric critics because 'the moral depravity of contemporary Ghanaian and African polity' depicted in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and in *Fragments* is no longer the target of Armah's new 'literary warfare' - the 'fighting literature', to cite again from Fanon (1967:179). Because the literary bullets, Amuta argues, are now directed mainly against 'the centuries of European brigandage in Africa ... Bernth Lindfors dismisses *Two Thousand Seasons* as a dangerous book to put in the hands of young Africans and evaluates *The Healers* in similar vein ...' (Amuta, 1989:27)[9].

Amuta also attempts to unravel the reasons behind the negative and shallow critical pronouncements by African writer-critics on African literary texts. But although Amuta's commentary heading entitled 'The African Writer as

Literary Critic' provides only a partial answer to the problem, his insight illuminates some of the short-sightedness which permeates the critical evaluation of African writer-critics who appraise the works of other African writers. According to Amuta, the poor quality of criticism coming from some African writer-critics emanates from their propensity to perceive the works of other African writers through their own subjective world views (1989:27). Georg Lukacs (1971:198) substantiates this when he declares in his *Writer and Critic* that:

> No matter how broad the horizon of his social and personal interests or how original and profound his intellect, the writer-critic generally approaches aesthetic problems from the point of view of the concrete questions arising in his own creative work, and he refers his conclusion ... back to his own work.
> (Lukacs, 1971:198)

Amuta's and Lukacs's explicative formulations appear to explain partially Achebe's curt dismissal of *Two thousand Seasons*. Kofi Anyidoho also rejects Achebe's dismissal of Armah's work as a 'fantasy' and contends in his paper, 'African Creative Fiction and a Poetics of Social Change' (1986), that 'Far from being a fantasy of the historical past, it [*Two Thousand Seasons*] is concerned, above all, with the future of the African peoples' (1986:73). The work which has been summarily dismissed as 'a cartoon history' and 'a complete failure' by Achebe and Lindfors is described by Anyidoho as a masterpiece 'of contemporary African fiction' (1986:67). Complimentary views of the novel are unequivocally sustained by critics like Ime Ikiddeh (1986), Neil Lazarus (1990), Ato Sekyi-Otu (1987), Isidore Okpewho (1983a; 1983b) and Abena P.A. Busia (1986)[10].

Although this critique discounts the views that *Two Thousand Seasons*'s representation of prehistorical Africa is historically and artistically unrealistic as contended by many Eurocentric critics, it does not fully accept Amuta's explanation of 'colonialist criticism' as the root cause of the Eurocentric negative criticism of the novel, particularly

Lindfors's critical invective on the novel. Later in the course of this investigation, I will attempt to substantiate the hypothesis that the underlying causes of critical impasse arise from two major sources: the unfortunate connotations "didactic" fiction has acquired - the pejorative and the descriptive senses (Scholes and Kellogg, 1966:106) - and the complex and confusing debate that has developed around the theory of historiography, and what 'historical realism' and 'artistic reality' in literature consist of.

The immediate concern of this study is to examine how Armah manipulates Africa's oral epic traditions and historical experience in order to achieve his creative purpose. In his article, 'Style and Purpose in Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*', A. N. Mensah rationalizes and dramatizes what makes *Two Thousand Seasons* 'a problematic novel and pushes it toward the epic':

> Let us dramatize the situation a little and imagine the author declaring as follows: "I have a story of great importance to tell Africa. Not one of those stories of Africa's disintegration or of an individual African's inability to belong. No, this is something larger and more wholesome, telling of the tribulations of the tribe and ending with a glorious vision of Africa's reawakening and unification. Indeed, a grand public theme. But how do I tell such a story, this Pan-African saga? Of course! In the manner of the griots of old. In the manner of Niane's *Sundiata*!'
>
> (Mensah, 1991:5)

Though Mensah's view suggests that Armah's narrator tells his story 'in the manner of Niane's *Sundiata*', the collective bardic narrator's attitude to the sacrosanct African oral traditions is rather irreverent and irreconcilable with the traditional African epic heroism. In fact, the narrative structure of *Two Thousand Seasons* is self-consciously inconsistent with that of Niane's conventional African oral epic. This does not suggest that this novel does not assimilate elements from the African oral epic genre. Though the text incorporates selected features of the African oral

arts, this assimilation amounts to a dialectical and ideological revision of the genre.

Unlike Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* and Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*, which, despite their great departures from the African oral epic traditions, affirm the most fundamental element of the genre - the portrayal of individualized epic protagonists who are endowed with noble ancestry - Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* is centred around a collective heroic entity. The traditional single supernatural hero, the cardinal feature of oral epics, is replaced by a collective heroic ideal which is symbolized by the protean 'we' instead of the traditional 'I'. Armah's composite heroic ideal, or what Kofi Anyidoho calls the 'aesthetics of the communal ethos' in his 'African Creative Fiction and A Poetics of Social Change' (1986:68), constitutes his greatest deviation from the African oral epic tradition. Instead of the omnipotent hero, Armah assigns the epic heroic role to a group of initiates led by a sage, Isanusi[11] - a plural heroic entity stripped of all the supernatural attributes of the African conventional epic hero. The isolation of a single individual for glorification and detailed portraiture as demanded by the African oral epic tradition is rejected in favour of the celebration of the communal ideal. In Mofolo's *Chaka*, the anti-legendary narratorial voice which battles with the African traditional bardic voice for absolute control of the thrust of the narrative becomes the dominant voice only after Chaka has met Isanusi and has become king. In Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, the anti-epic narrator impersonates and dominates the voice of the traditional chronicler from the very beginning of the narrative to the very end, projecting a historical version of the past which is not only totally anti-epic and anti-traditional, but which also rejects Euro-Arab imperialist historical distortions. The pervasive voice of irreverence generated by the novel against the African legendary tradition is confirmed by Kofi Anyidoho:

> Armah's novel is not about individual characterization and the creation of heroes .... Historical realism may

> celebrate individual characters and events, but only because each one is seen in isolation from the total environment. The novelist brings all events and all characters together into one flowing stream, and suddenly the splendour of heroes is soiled by the mess they themselves created in their obscene haste for glory.
>
> (Anyidoho, 1981-1982:109)

The anti-epic narrator in *Two Thousand Seasons* contemptuously dismisses past and present legendary heroes of Africa as 'single peacocks strutting against each other's glory' (p.42). What is being gradually unfolded here is not only a rejection of the usable historical old myths of Africa, but also a reinterpretation of African history and a recreation of a new mythology for Africa. The novel treats racist colonial myths and indigenous African ones which were crafted by supernatural despotic kings to enslave the people alike. As Amuta points out in his 'Ayi Kwei Armah and the Mythopoesis of Mental Decolonization', Armah's 'use of myth to achieve mental freedom involves, first, the debunking of the outgrowths of the primary racist mythic supposition' and the fabulous mythic fabrications of African tyrannical kings, 'accompanied by the erection of counter-myths' (1981:46). Anyidoho affirms Armah's narrator's ambivalent attitude to the past - his denigration and recreation/redefinition of the past - when he asserts that '... in transforming historical experience into fictional discourse, Armah both subverts and recreates history' (Anyidoho, 1981-1982:109). Armah's equivocal attitude to the African oral epic tradition is further confirmed by Okpewho's comment:

> In *Two Thousand Seasons* Armah acknowledges the power and charm of the African oral tradition; but he will have none of that social stratification which the tales advertise. What we have in the book is a tale in the oral style all right, but one that is intensely critical rather than eulogistic or designed to please, one that rejects the present social history of Africa as unrepresentative of its true character and so projects us, in true prophetic fashion, to a vision of an Africa that is free of its shackles and guided by an ideology or religion....
>
> (Okpewho, 1983a:205)

Armah's creative purpose is to refashion a new Afrocentric identity for Africa. Since the old fantastic myths of supernatural heroes and magical kings are rejected, Armah's novel demolishes the existing Black image of Africa in order to recreate a new one - an image grounded on communal wholeness. Individualized fabulous heroes of the past have no place in Armah's new mythology. This interpretation is cogently articulated by Chidi Amuta (1981). Amuta declares that 'Armah is concerned with myth not as an anonymous tale of ethnic origins or the genealogy [sic] of the pantheon of godlings in the ethnic arsenal but as a consistent pattern of perceiving reality or relating with it'. He concludes, and rightly so, that Armah 'is allergic to myth as a commonly held figment, a consciously invented belief system that is fostered and perpetuated for the specific purpose of advancing the interests of the myth-making group at the expense of all other groups' (1981:45). This comment reveals the two-pronged dimension of the text's manipulation of myth-making: both the colonial racist myths and those of the African god-like tyrannical kings are exploded.

In *Two Thousand Seasons*, Armah's anti-legendary narrator not only divests his narration of all the flamboyant and bombastic rhetorical flourishes, he also inverts what Isidore Okpewho calls the sense of the moment - the stage in which a portentous event occurs in the life of the epic hero. In African epics climactic alerts are used to evoke or initiate praise singing triggered by wondrous feats of bravery by the epic hero. In Armah's novel, the climactic alert 'Hau!' is frequently deployed to signal the sense of the moment. But contrary to the ancient African epic tradition, instead of the expected evocation of glorification and celebration, the oral climactic alerts only invoke lamentation and rhetorical exclamations. The oral alert 'Hau!' opens the prologue to the novel as follows: 'Hau, people headed after the setting sun, in that direction even the possibility of regeneration is dead' (p.xi). The setting sun is a symbol that permeates the

novel, representing the source of derailment for Africa's natural flow of life - the Arabs whom the text labels 'the desert predators'. The novel intimates that the chiefs are not the only ones who are mentally blind or idiotic and it evokes this sad state of affairs with the eulogistic alert reserved for initiating praise singing: 'Hau! It is *not only rife among the fatted chiefs, this idiocy* of the destroyed' (p.7). The novel eschews eulogies which traditionally characterize African epics as the ritualization of tragedies and lamentations. This anti-panegyric patterning is further substantiated by 'Hau! What a shrivelling there has been in the spirits of our people; what a destructive fragmentation of our soul!' (p.184). Another graphic illustration of how the narrator inverts the rhetorical alerts by negating the normal positive function of the climactic repetitions which generate lyrical feeling concerned with pleasing the ear is the incident in which the ex-slaves and the initiates defeat the European slave traders and free all the slaves. This 'illusory' victory would have been celebrated by the conventional African epic tradition. But in *Two Thousand Seasons*, instead of the expected panegyrical flourishes and celebration, what the anti-legendary narrator offers the reader 'is either a condemnatory ring ... or ... harsh admonitory din so as to burn the message indelibly into the reader's mind ...' (Okpewho, 1983:7):

> But we should not stop the onward flow of work with overlong remembrance of single battles won, of new people welcomed, of the increase of courage for the journeys of the way. For this is mere beginning, not a time for the satisfaction of sweet remembrances.
> (p.179)

Armah's anti-traditional narrator's creative ploy of masking his hostile intentions to denigrate and to subvert Africa's legendary tradition by impersonating the voice of the traditional chronicler is demystified by his project, which is irreconcilable with that of the conventional oral epic bard. *Two Thousand Seasons*'s overt muffling of the traditional praise singing and celebration while amplifying

condemnation and sadness are illustrated by Okpewho. Okpewho, the Nigerian folklorist, asserts:

> Where the oral narrator would dwell at considerable length on events that call for glorification with due rhetorical *elan*, Armah's narrator dismisses such events with only a flourish of rhetorical questions so that the audience is not diverted by cheap adulation from the urgent task that lies ahead.
>
> (Okpewho, 1983:7-8)

The most illuminating illustration of this anti-praise-singing posture is the narrator's suppression of the desire to celebrate the successful escape from the desert predators and the safe arrival in Anoa after the long and treacherous migration through the vast wilderness of prehistoric Africa. The sublime physical beauty of 'the promised' land invokes and forces praise singing from the reluctant lips of the narrator, but he successfully suppresses the panegyrical impulse struggling within his breast (p.56):

> With what shall the utterer's tongue stricken with goodness, riven silent with the quiet force of beauty, with which mention shall the tongue of the utterers begin a song of praise whose perfect singers have yet to come?
> And the time for singing, whence shall the utterers, whence the singers gather it when this remembrance is no easy celebration but a call to the terrifying work of creation's beginning? ... This promise of a praise song will pass swiftly .... (p.56)

The expected eulogizing is reduced to rhetorical exclamations and the intimation that celebration will be premature since 'creation's work' is just beginning and final victory or emancipation is two thousand seasons away. The purpose of Armah's narrator is not only to annihilate the legendary tradition but also to correct and re-write the African oral epic aesthetics. In an unambiguously virulent tone, the anti-legendary voice of irreverence presents traditional Africa's panegyrics as empty flattery and the traditional oral artist as a degenerate. Using Isanusi as the focalizer, the narrator scornfully dismisses traditional bards and court historians as mercenaries who prostitute the African traditional oral arts:

> Isanusi ... went to the town of Poano .... There he saw the victory of the white destroyers, the utter destruction of souls. He saw there was *no fundi* there who *was not first of all a prostitute. Experts in the art of eloquence* he saw *bought to speak for thieves.* Experts in the art of singing he saw *bought to sing the praises not just of one parasite, the king, but also of any bloated passer who could pay their paltry price.* (p.103, my emphasis)

The thrust of the novel is that the fabulous tales of Africa's Golden Age of supernatural kings are nothing but an invention of impotent flatterers who immortalized their masters, the self-created god-like kings, to promote their own physical survival. The decay of the traditions of the African oral arts fictionalized in *Two Thousand Seasons* is corroborated in Kofi Awoonor's doctoral thesis, *A Study of the Influences of Oral Literature on the Contemporary Literature of Africa* (1972). Awoonor's formulation, which is more applicable to West African grioture than to the Southern African *izibongo*, asserts that some West African oral artists, particularly among the Yoruba, the Hausa and the Wolof, have become "mercenaries": 'professional praise-singers who follow their patron through the streets, beating out his patronymic salutations, and heaping upon him an exaggerated array of praise epithets':

> They may liken him to the elephant to signify his strength, the fox for his sagacity, the cow for his meekness. If he recognizes their work and rewards them, he may soon be elevated to the status of a lion, leopard or such other noble beast. *But if he makes the mistakes of ignoring them, he may soon be likened to the red-bottomed baboon, or the greedy goat who ate too much at his own mother's funeral and thus befouled the funeral compound.*
>
> (Awoonor, 1972:26, my emphasis)

Although the oral artist who works for the powerful chief does not have this poetic licence, Awoonor's insight reveals the potential progressive degeneration of African traditional arts, satirized by Armah's irreverent neo-traditional narrator. The sullied image of the traditional bard is not only linked to the general moral abyss of traditional rulers who are perceived as parasites but it also leads naturally to

the creation of an anti-legendary mythology which does not spare contemporary African leaders either. In the most corrosive indictment against pre-colonial and modern Africa - the African oral artist, the chief and his beneficiary, the modern African leader - the anti-legendary narrator unveils the African notables' propensity for hero-worshipping, self-indulgence and praise singing. The text manipulates the character of Kamuzu to project this vision:

> Nor was he [Kamuzu] satisfied merely with our proffered services as praise-singers: the buffoon must have suspected some humour in our chanting. He found an old singer with a high, racing voice to sing for him, and a hireling drummer brought from Poano beat out the words on mercenary skin for his flattery. (p.172)

If the above comment does not unmask Kamuzu's obsession for self-deification enough, the protean anti-traditional narratorial voice - intent on leading the reader to perceive Kamuzu in totally negative terms - seals his castigation with a moralistic stamp by adding that 'When he was not steeped in self-flattery Kamuzu raged against us for our continued hostility to the white destroyers' (p.172). The most caustic censure of praise singing is the text's satiric attack on the King: 'Bulukutu, he who gave himself a thousand grandiose, empty names of praise yet died forgotten except in the memories of laughing rememberers ...' (pp.63-64). Besides the manipulation of traditions of the African oral arts in order to effect the demolition of the old fabulous image of the past and to replace the false image with a new communally-oriented image, *Two Thousand Seasons* also re-orders African history through a process of de-mythification of the Euro-Arab myths of Africa and a re-creation of a new African mythology.

Though many critics, especially Africans, contend that the preoccupation of the novel's myth-making is influenced by Marxist ideas, the replacement of legendary tales with communally-based tales projects more of Fanonian revolutionary ideas, I believe, than those of Karl Marx:

> ... the oral tradition - stories, epics and songs of the people - which formerly were filed away as set pieces are now beginning to change. The storytellers who used to relate inert episodes now ... introduce modifications which are increasingly fundamental. There is a tendency to bring conflicts up to date and modernize the kinds of struggle which the stories evoke, together with the names of the heroes and the types of weapons. ... the storytellers ... completely overturned their traditional methods and contents of their tales.
>
> (Fanon, 1965:193)

The didactic structure of the novel and its parodic stylistic tropes and modes which are programmed to dismantle the African legendary tradition appear to echo the Fanonian sentiments expressed in the above quotation.

Although African traditional epics are structured around epic heroes and praise singing, Armah's anti-epic collective narrator deviates from the African oral tradition and crafts his tale around a concept - 'the way'. Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* is a didactic fictional history, to borrow from Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1973), which combines 'a certain amount of "data," theoretical concepts for "explaining" these data, and a narrative structure for' its 'presentation as an icon of sets of events presumed to have occurred in times past' (1973:ix). 'The way', which the novel deliberately locates in an indeterminate period in prehistoric Africa, is vaguely defined in negative terms. The narrator carefully explains that it is pointless and impossible for any people to trace their genesis with certainty: 'That we the black people are one people we know. ... How the very first of us lived, of that ultimate origin we have had unnumbered thoughts and more mere fables passed down to us from those gone before, but of none of this has any of us been told it was sure knowledge' (p.3). The text's self-conscious subversion of its own internal illusion of reliability and reality is a creative technique fashioned to deflate Euro-Arab claims to superior myths of origin whose superiority is said to emanate from their written status Okpewho asserts

that Armah has thus succeeded in creating a new myth around 'the way':

> A single historical moment or cultural act has achieved a semiotic value in the illustration of a chosen idea. *Two Thousand Seasons* thus fulfils one of the fundamental functions of myth, which is to transmute reality into fancy through the medium of symbolism.
>
> (Okpewho, 1983b.14)

Closely related to the demolition of the pre-colonial legendary tradition and the hero-worshipping enshrined in contemporary African political culture (which is faithfully copied from the ancient fabulous image of god-like kings) is the novel's subversion of Euro-Arab myths about Africa - an elaborate process of de-mythification. One of the many graphic examples which permeate this novel runs as follows:

> We have not found that lying trick to our taste, the trick of making up sure knowledge of things impossible to think of, things possible to wonder about but impossible to know in any such ultimate way. We are not stunted in spirit, we are not Europeans, we are not Christians that we should invent fables a child would laugh at and harden our eyes to preach them daylight and deep night as truth. We are not so warped in soul, we are not Arabs, we are not Muslims to fabricate a desert god chanting madness in the wilderness, and call our creature creator. That is not our way. (p.3)

Through this technique, the anti-imperial narratorial voice explodes the Euro-Arab myths which portray pre-Euro-Arab Africa as a dark continent of pagans and unbelievers. The holy texts on which this religious bigotry is founded are the Bible and the Koran. By referring to the scriptures as 'fables a child would laugh at', the Afrocentric narrative voice ridicules the very criterion by which the traditional Africans are branded as idol-worshippers. The de-mythification is extended to the Islamic faith which also perceives pre-Arab Africa as a primitive continent populated by infidels. Speaking with tongue in cheek, the anti-Arab narrator asserts that 'We are not so warped in soul, we are not Arabs, we are not Muslims to fabricate a desert god chanting madness in the wilderness, and call our creature creator. That is not our way' (p.3). Wright confirms the

text's didactic thrust and its manipulation of 'the way' when he asserts that Armah's 'didactic purpose is to cure an errant Africa of its diseased distrust in its own indigenous forms and values' and concludes that 'The dogma of the Way works from the premise that one made-up ethno-centred history, serving one set of ideological needs, is as good as or better than another one which serves different and alien needs' (1988:96).

Amuta confirms the thrust of this critique when he asserts that 'In addition to the much talked about preoccupation with historical reconstruction, *Two Thousand Seasons* contains a great deal of de-mythification' (1981:46). Amuta argues that 'the ideological launching pad of Arab and Western imperialism as contained in the' Islamic religion and the Christian faith 'are easily deflated' by the text. The two major religions - Islam and Christianity - which portray African traditional religious practices as paganistic are ridiculed. The text's sneer intimates that the Christian God and the Islamic Allah as portrayed by the Bible and the Koran, respectively, are 'bloated kings' (p. 83). The narrator's 'unmaking' of the Christian and Islamic 'masquerades', Amuta contends, suggests 'the superiority of the belief system of "the way" which emphasizes anthropomorphism over "the fables of children" that Christianity and Islam propagate (Amuta, 1981:46). In an essay entitled 'Masks and Marx ...', Armah reveals the Afrocentric sentiments which generate this anti-imperialist posturing by asserting that 'In religion, African religious practices and beliefs were given negative values as superstitions while Western religious practices and beliefs were defined as the true religion' (Armah, 1984:41).

The novel's historical reconstruction is not only concerned with challenging the extensive misrepresentation of African history but also with divesting legendary historical figures and traditional rulers of their false pretensions and

fabulous epic image. Like Mofolo's *Chaka*, *Two Thousand Seasons* appropriately begins by dismissing the Eurocentric version of African history:

> The air everywhere around is poisoned with truncated tales of our origins. That is also part of the wreckage of our people. What has been cast abroad is not a thousandth of our history, even if its quality were truth. The people called our people are not the hundredth of our people. But the haze of this fouled world exists to wipe out our knowledge of our way, the way. (p.1)

Another assumption which is projected by the text is the narrator's proprietorship over Africa. The pan-Africanist narrator asserts authoritatively that 'This land is ours, not through murder, not through theft, not by way of violence or any other trickery' (pp.3-4). Derek Wright's most recent article, 'Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*', reconfirms this view by arguing that 'Armah's self-consciously staged griot-like discourse is concerned to correct the method of narrating African history as well as the history itself. There are, therefore, some significant departures from story-telling traditions' (1992:84). In his 'Ayi Kwei Armah, History, and "The Way": The Importance of *Two Thousand Seasons*', Amuta declares that 'The historical reconstruction which is largely the preoccupation of *Two Thousand Seasons* is the result of Armah's aversion to the large-scale misrepresentation and distortion of African history in both colonialist and Eurocentric African historiography'. It is further argued that the novel begins the tale 'by rejecting an "imported history of Africa, resolutely' (1981:80). *Two Thousand Seasons'* revision of history is pan-Africanist in scope and the text achieves this continental dimension by resorting to multifarious techniques. One of these is the technique of using names from almost the entire fabric of African ethnic groups. The names deployed include Soyinka, Mofolo, Nandi, Noliwe, Ngubane, Abena, Dovi, Kamara, Manda, Kamuzu, Otumfuo and Isanusi. The anti-traditional narrator reaches the climax of his de-mythification project when he

links his anti-legend posturing with the famous pilgrimage to Mecca by Emperor Mansa Musa I of Mali.

Emperor Mansa Musa I of Mali (1307-1337) is isolated for vilification and stripping down because he is one of the most legendary historical figures in both African history and the history of the Black diaspora. His historic pilgrimage to Mecca, besides his military conquests and economic development, was his greatest historical achievement and it is overtly celebrated in both African and African American history. J.D. Fage's *A History of Africa* confirms the authenticity of Mansa Musa's historical achievement when he asserts that 'Musa is variously reported to have crossed the Sahara with 8000 to 15 000 retainers, and to have taken so much gold with him - and to have spent it so lavishly - that the value of the metal in Egypt was depreciated by 12 per cent ..(Fage, 1978:75). D.T. Niane's account in his work, *General History of Africa IV* (1984), confirms Mansa Musa's legendary image. Niane also records that 'Mansa Musa I is the best known of the emperors of Mali, largely because of his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1325 and the widespread fame of his visit to Cairo, where he gave away so much gold that the precious metal was depressed for a long time.' The famous emperor was said to have carried so much gold that 'the rest of the world think of his empire as an El Dorado' (Niane, 1984:148). The African American historian, John Hope Franklin also substantiates Emperor Mansa Musa's place in the annals of African history and the history of the Black diaspora when he reveals in his *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* that the legendary Mali emperor's pilgrimage to Mecca is historic because it offers undisputed evidence of the existence of the Golden Age in pre-colonial Africa. Franklin declares that 'The historic pilgrimage of Mansa Musa in 1325 exceeded all visits to Mecca by previous royal personages from the West and was to be matched by few, if any, in years to come.' His retinue 'was composed of thousands of persons, a large portion of which constituted a

military escort'; 'five hundred servants ... each bearing a staff of pure gold'; and 'eighty camels to bear his more than twenty-four thousand pounds of gold' (Franklin, 1980:7).

It is this irrefutable historical landmark the irreverent narrator of *Two Thousand Seasons* takes apart. The novel's extension of its neo-traditional literary warfare of the irreverent to Emperor Mansa Musa, not only intensifies its systematic dismantling of Africa's glorious past and ostentatious present, but also shows that Africa's fabulous historical figures cannot escape the text's iconoclastic drag-net. Thus, the neo-traditional narrator disdainfully dismisses Emperor Mansa Musa's historic pilgrimage to Mecca as 'a ridiculous pomp' of 'an imbecile' (p.74). What is celebrated in history texts as a great historical achievement is debased, disfigured, and completely reversed by *Two Thousand Seasons*. The fictional version of this event curtly dismisses the recorded historical event as 'the stupid pilgrimage', 'a ridiculous pomp', and a 'gigantic wastage' which is celebrated by naive Black historians as 'some unspoken glory' for Black Africa. Mansa Musa I, the ancient legendary hero, is depicted as 'an imbecile' who hauls gold across the Sahara to Mecca, hoping to display the richness of his empire and himself to the rest of the world. The result of this 'moron journey', we are told, is the invasion of Africa by Arabs and Europeans, who probed for the discovery and the control of the source of the gold that was so ill-advisedly advertised to the world by Mansa Musa I (pp.62, 74). Although *Two Thousand Seasons* has flushed out of the annals of African history many of the celebrated legendary figures of Africa's past and present, many African critics still regard this work as a positive novel which projects a better future for Africa because Anoa predicts a muted hope for Africa - an emancipation after one thousand years of slavery. Thus, Dan Izevbaye asserts, in his 'Reality in The African Novel: Its Theory and Practice', that 'Where Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* almost reveres the past, Ouologuem's

Bound to Violence denigrates it and tramples on the hitherto respected heads of the ancestors' (1986:119). This view oversimplifies Armah's view of the past and 'the hitherto respected heads of the ancestors' whom his novel divests of their false grandeur and dismisses as 'morons'.

The disfigured fictive portrait of the famous ancient emperor crystallizes how the novel sets about to destroy and to reverse the mythical Golden Age of Africa. The text engages upon a monstrous counter-culture which rejects not only the Euro-Arab myths about Africa as expected, but also the Black myths about Africa. The anti-legend narrator's aversion to the marvellous deeds of the supernatural heroes is debunked by Christopher Caudwell who asserts in his *Illusion and Reality* (1946) that the original impulse of the communal wholeness of the old legends might have been adapted and deliberately adulterated by the ruling class. The result is that the powerless community plays the role of 'an exploited class and is tainted with the idiocy[12] of exploitation' (1946:41-42). Okpewho endorses this formulation when he declares that in *Two Thousand Seasons* Armah perceives the oral tradition in its present form as '... the degeneration of the oral tradition from a people's metaphysical enquiry (undertaken in an honest collective spirit) into the nature of things (mythology) to a base superstitious adoration (legend) of a god-king beneath whom the exploited and dehumanized folk grovel ...' (Okpewho, 1983b:10). The novel condemns the aesthetics of the supernatural heroism centred around fantasy and brigandry which the African legend has created:

> Children walked among us believing secretly there had been an age of giants and doers of great deeds now gone, and that these doers of great deeds had been their fathers'. They heard secret, nostalgic tales of a time when a brave man had no need to do the careful, steady work of planting, watching, harvesting, but could in one sudden, brilliant flash of violent energy capture from others all the riches he craved, then like a python lie lazy through the length of coming seasons, consuming his victim [sic] profit. (p.32)

This artistic purpose is self-evident in the novel's presentation of traditional African chiefs as 'parasites', 'perverts', and 'morons'. The saga retells Africa's racial flow of life from the dawn of history towards the present and the future. The novel's repudiation of Emperor Mansa Musa I is, therefore, extended to cover that of his heirs, the chiefs who had the first contact with the European imperialists. Thus, Mansa Musa's 'moronic pilgrimage' leads naturally to the text's intricate caricaturing of chiefs, symbolized by a catalogue of infamous kings - the microcosm of the centuries of the tyrannical rule created by African semi-divine warrior-kings. The list is topped by King Koranche, the most evil and the most idiotic king of the group:

> So among us the ostentatious cripples turned the honoured positions of caretakers into plumage for their infirm selves. Which shall we now choose to remember of the many idiocies our tolerance has supported? ... Let us finish speedily with their mention. The memory of these names is corrosive. Its poison sears our lips. Odunton, Bentum, Oko, Krobo, Jebi, Jonto, Sumui, Oburum, Ituri, Dube, Mununkum, Esibir, Bonto, Peturi, Topre, Tutu, Bonsu, and lately, Koranche. (pp.63-64)

The self-conscious listing of the evil and depraved kings, who again are taken from the whole continent - from the Islamic north (Peturi/Ituri) to Southern Africa (Dube) - is a creative ploy designed to evoke the view that the trend is continental and not only limited to the Akans. The narrator's attitude to traditional African chiefs - the custodians of Africa's moral and cultural purity - is eloquently revealed by the contemptuous tone of his voice. The narrator attempts to cleanse the moral murk in which the god-like kings have covered Africa by deploying a ritualized style structured around the profane. The reader gets the distinct impression that the narrator intends to purify the spiritual and physical rot with verbal rot - a creative ploy akin to the ritualistic carrier motif in which moral and spiritual filth is carried ritualistically at the end of the year by a chosen victim (Robin Horton, 1960:259). A graphic example of this is

the royal python ritual ceremony held every year in Afife (Ghana) - a ritual which cleanses accumulated offences of the year and engenders regeneration by reversing all taboos, including the ethical ones on profanity and totemic taboos. The demonic iconoclastic onslaught directed against the legendary heroes of the past and present is underscored by Derek Wright in his 'Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*'. Wright points out that Armah's 'avowedly anti-elitist standpoint shuns the griot's customary glorification of the matchless deeds of the past heroes, rejects the supernatural along with the superhuman and denies the narrator's single creative personality and domineering proprietorship over the events narrated' (1992:84). The classic example of this stylistic patterning is the hailstorm of verbal abuse and profanity which the text unleashes during the harem revolt against the desert predators:

> Hussein, twin brother of Hassan the Syphilitic. Hussein had long since given up the attempt to find a way for his phallus into any woman's genitals. His tongue was always his truest pathfinder.
>
> (p.21)

Since the slave kings are the inherent source of the moral muck which strangulates Armah's world, the novel gives them also a ritual bath of verbal rot akin to the physical ritual cleansing Ousmane Sembene's depraved hero is given when he is ritually assaulted with "smelly and yellow spittle" by "the vomit of the society", led by the famous beggar in *Xala* (1974:108-114)). In Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, we are told that 'The quietest king, the gentlest leader of the mystified, is criminal beyond the exercise of any comparison' (p.64). The most abrasive invective hurled at the traditional ruler is the attack on King Topre. The novel's ironic portrayal of King Topre, who, in his determination to preserve the purity of the royal family, refuses to copulate with any woman except his own sister, unveils this central concern. The purity of King Topre's blood and his sister's, which he has tried to keep from being tainted by an inferior

breed of men, is manifested by the rare "intelligence" of their first son, Prince Tutu:

> Tutu, the first son of that copulation, was an idiot; not like his mother, astounded into imbecility by Topre's heated insistence, but in his own right a pure, congenital fool. After Tutu there was Bonsu, his stupidities so monstrous and so well known it would be wasted breath repeating them. (p.66)

Armah's irreverent narratorial voice intimates that the fictional world of this novel is an unusual cosmos, ruled by 'congenital' imbeciles - a world running in a reverse order. The novel maintains that the chiefs have not only prepared the way for the derailment of contemporary Africa, but they are also said to be responsible for the institutionalization of slavery which was originally introduced by the Arabs. *Two Thousand Seasons* repeatedly maintains that slavery and chieftaincy are inseparably bonded together. This mystified relationship between the slave and the chief is illuminated by the most macabre and devastating satiric trope used in the novel:

> Have you not seen the fat ones, the hollow ones now placed above us? ... We have a vision of a slave man roaming the desert sand - a perfect image of our hollow chiefs today. Language he had not, not ours, and not his own. It had been voided out of him, his tongue cut out from his mouth. He pointed to the gaping cavity. Thinking he still had a soul, even mutilated, we imagined he was after sympathy. We were mistaken - he was pointing to the hole with pride. They had destroyed his tongue, they had put pieces of brass there to separate the lower jaw from the upper jaw. The slave thought the brass a gift. He communicated his haughty pride to us, indicating in the sand with precise remembrance when he had achieved each piece of brass, what amazing things he had been made to do in order to be given them. (p.7)

The image of the tongueless slave with a gaping cavity kept open by pieces of brass which the blind and naive slave treasures as precious gifts is brilliantly illuminated and reinforced by the symbol of the mask with the Ananse motif which Dr Earl Lynch, an African American character in Armah's *Why Are We So Blest?*, owns but fails to understand (p.32).

Two Thousand Seasons, like Armah's other novels, presents the metaphysical blindness of Africa's ruling elite as the root cause of Africa's perpetual suffering and that of the alien domination of the continent. The intensity of the blindness and the naivete revealed by this demonic image identifies the ancient chiefs and the institution of slavery as the focus of the novel. The chief and the slave are so close that *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers* suggest that one begets the other; but which of the two is the begetter, is deliberately cloaked in mystery. Through a systematic deployment of images of moral putrefaction and ironic reversals, the novel has succeeded in exposing traditional rulers, and the modern socialist, revolutionary rulers of Black Africa - the past and the present legendary heroes - as destructive, 'parasitic', 'imbeciles' whose destiny in life is dominated by a single powerful purpose: to indulge their 'crassest physical wants' (p.31). It goes on to say:

> Our chiefs, our leaders, they have bellies and they have tongues. Minds they do not have. That is the white destroyers' happiness; that is why the white destroyers will exhaust their long knowledge of murder to keep our rotten chiefs, our bloated leaders on top of us. *No one sold us but our chiefs and their hangers-on.* (p.146. my emphasis)

The novel holds 'our chiefs and their hangers-on' responsible for the sale of millions of Africans into slavery. This declaration is contrary to the traditional view of Afrocentric historians, who indict Arabs and Europeans for the expansion of the Arab slave trade across the Sahara and the European slave trade across the Atlantic. The reduction of human existence to physical gratification and pleasure, the narrator contends, has become life's supreme goal which is pursued by the ruling class and their hangers-on. It is suggested that African racial rites of passage have become lop-sided, centred around the belly and leaving the head famished and deformed like Dr Lynch's Ananse mask referred to above. *Two Thousand Seasons* maintains that Black racial history and heritage reveal centuries of blinding which has effectively blunted the African's perception of his real

world and destiny. The chiefs, the custodians of African heritage and history, are painted as dim-witted, in-breeding and impotent parasites dominated by criminal mentality and obsessed with self-deification. *Two Thousand Seasons* portrays the hereditary rule of chiefs as a rotten system of government in which the intelligent, the skilful, and the productive are ruled by 'those born mediocre' - 'the congenital fools' (p.66, 74). The omniscient narrator, who often intrudes to reveal the hidden thoughts of the characters to the reader, comments on and moralizes about the 'moronic' king, Koranche, thus:

> The king [Koranche] felt happy at the thought of Ngubane's destruction, and gratitude filled his heart when he contemplated the social power that had made it possible. Now life became clear again in his mind: *a conflict between the unjustly intelligent, the experts with their skill and their intelligence on one hand*, and on the other hand *those born mediocre*, those inferior through no fault of their own, *the hollow ones, the stupid ones, the uncreative ones*. (p.73-74, my emphasis)

The anti-traditional narrator, intent upon reversing the entire course of Africa's rites of passage resorts to the hyperbolic and caustic satiric tropes and modes in order to drive his message home. The novel portrays in revolting language the carnal descent of the legendary ancient rulers and their mentors, the Arabs. The first sexual pervert is King Jonto, who carves a glorious name for himself and the royal family by being acclaimed the greatest destroyer and the only king who sexually abuses young boys as well as animals:

> Destruction was his pleasure. In his gentlest moods he was a bloody lecher. From the unprompted craving of his soul he had a special enclosure built. In it he shut up not only selected animals but also virgins - girls as well as boys - chosen for his insatiate urge. (p.64).

It could be contended that sexual decay and debauchery which critics argue that *Two Thousand Seasons* presents as Arab imports into Africa the text suggests is native and deeply rooted within the indigenous elite. Hunter Brafo's father's sexual greed - the insatiable sexual craving of one of the

first progenitors of pre-Euro-Arab Africa - which drives the fifty-year old patriarch to the attempted murder of his son and his ward, Ajoa, discounts the perception that prehistoric Africa was mantled in moral purity. The novel suggests that the ancient moral depravity which permeates the ruling class ranges from the cradle of Africa's history to the present and the future. The novel intimates that the voracity of the sexual beast in man drives the ancient patriarchs to commit demonic acts of cruelty when their sexual desires are thwarted. King Koranche's satanic extermination of 'Ngubane the farming fundi', who dares to marry Idawa, who contemptuously rejects King Koranche's marriage offer, reinforces this insight:

> Ngubane the farming fundi had fallen to a beast. Beast unnamed, strangest of beasts indeed, that severed the dead man's genitals, stuffed them in his throat and threw the body in the river weighted with a rock.... (p.71)

The work thus presents a detailed fictional version of prehistoric Africa which completely negates the notion of the Golden Age in traditional Africa. That the kings of Euro-Arab colonial Africa are presented as being so evil and immoral that they could destroy anyone who came between them and their unquenchable sexual desires, suggests how decayed this world has become since the advent of the Arabs and the Europeans who prop up the corrupt and despotic indigenous rulers against their own people in order to achieve their own aims: the exploitation of the natural resources of Africa. *Two Thousand Seasons* continues its denigration of chiefs by showing how far the traditional rulers have sunk since the rule of the pre-colonial Africa's elected 'caretakers' and the reign of colonial African chiefs. The reader is told that King Koranche adulterates ancient rituals in order to make the most beautiful virgin girls of every initiation group available to the princes of the royal house. King Koranche's sudden introduction of a change into the ancient ritual dance does not fool the initiates:

> ... it was the king's wish that the girl left last within the middle circle should not choose a dancer among ourselves, but a special guest of honour he the king was bringing us. We did not have to wait to find out who this special creature was: the prince Bentum, renamed Bradford George, voided of his soul, had fled his white cripple of a wife and come home looking for beauty and goodness to sacrifice to his murdered soul. (p.92)

The trap which is set to ensnare the beautiful virgin initiate, Abena - like Brafo's father intended for Ajoa and King Koranche's for Idawa - is discovered by the victim who is a visionary, endowed with supreme native wit. Africa's seduction by a European ethos and the degeneration of her rituals and culture are symbolized by the destructive role of the supernatural and tyrannical kings. The novel's structure links the corrupt progenitors/caretakers - 'the ostentatious cripples' - of pre-Euro-Arab Africa with the slave-kings of Euro-Arab colonial Africa and the political notables of modern Africa.

The creative synthesizing of the three periods of Africa's servitude and tyranny is achieved by the text's manipulation of Kamuzu's portraiture and the symbol of the slave castle. The text's reconstruction of history is governed by its didactic and propagandistic orientation. Hence, the past is reinterpreted in terms of the present. The text's characterization of Kamuzu illuminates this perception. Kamuzu's portrayal is a brilliant creative ploy designed to reinforce the view that Africa's past foibles beget the present moral and political derailment of the continent. Equally innovative is the text's symbolic exploitation of the name, Kamuzu[13], which symbolizes the political culture of contemporary Africa. In Kamuzu, the novel aesthetically unifies the repeated historical weaknesses of pre-colonial, colonial, and contemporary Africa, and suggests that the present decay is a natural growth or progression from that of pre-Euro-Arab Africa. Kamuzu, we are told, joins the initiates and Isanusi in fighting against the European slave

traders who live in the castle only because he has been cheated out of his expected profit from a deal with the king of Poano, King Atobra. Isanusi retells us Kamuzu's experience with the Poano royalty - why 'the bitterest enmity runs in his [Kamuzu's] blood against the princes of Poano and their parasites':

> Kamuzu once helped Atobra, king of Poano, his three princes and his parasites at court to deceive, capture and then sell a large number of slaves to the white destroyers, only to have the king, the princes and the other parasites hold back from him his agreed share of the price paid for women and men. Kamuzu's anger against the king, the princes and the parasites is that kind of anger, anger with nothing pure, nothing good in it. Kamuzu does not hate the enslavement of our people. What he hates is his own exclusion from the profits of the trade. (p.159-160)

The vision being projected here is that of the endless cycle of betrayals Africa has been subjected to by her notables. Kamuzu's aim in joining the initiates in their fight against slavery is directed purely by selfish motives. He symbolizes the class of the past and the present ruling elite, composed of opportunists and traitors who are guided solely by the desire to amass material wealth and to achieve personal grandeur. The protean narrator who speaks here under the guise of the anti-slavery initiates, led by Isanusi, reveals the parodic mode of the text. The relevant narrative is cited in full because it illuminates the novel's ingenious handling of the parodic technique as an act of recreation and as an instrument of criticism:

> Thirty of us went with Isanusi: for Kamuzu's angry chieftain friend, the fabled one thirsty for hot blood, he was to be Isanusi himself. Fantastic we look in our special robes - robes capacious... Incredible we looked, but none more amazing to sight than Isanusi himself. *Hau! What an imbecility always is the high ceremony of state and royalty...*
>
> Is it not enough just to say Isanusi was dressed with all the foolish magnificence of royalty? ... On his head he wore a high, gilded hat, woven in imitation of a crown. A rainbow would have turned white with envy to behold his long robe.... Fool's gold glittered hoarser than the red; a deep, false blue struggled to push the brighter colours into obscurity ... But the most

> unashamedly royal adornment was this: pieces of broken metal, even bits from some white destroyer's shattered mirror, all were sewn in patches into *the screaming pattern of the gown proclaiming brilliant royalty*. That was hardly all. On the wearer's ankles small, high-pitched bells tinkled with every step he took. *Nor did Isanusi forget to add to his accoutrement a long fly-whisk, indispensable tool of all flyblown leadership.* (pp.162-163, my emphasis)

This narrative embodies the different historical symbols of self-deification which have been used by African rulers and notables from ancient times to the present. The neo-traditional narrator, intent on drawing the reader's attention to the need to go into an elaborate description of Isanusi's grotesque 'royal' robe, deploys a self-conscious narrative technique, aimed at destroying the reader's illusion of the text's imitation of reality: 'Is it not enough just to say Isanusi was dressed with all the foolish magnificence of royalty?' In other words, the narrator is determined to give us the bizarre visual image of the ostentatious attributes of African traditional royalty. A careful textual analysis of this innovative narrative technique reveals a number of interesting insights. The phrase the 'angry chieftain friend, the fabled one thirsty for hot blood' parodies the legendary warrior heroes of traditional Africa whom the novel presents as empty ostentatious beings who conceal their hollowness under grandiose worthless praise names and bloodthirstiness. Isanusi's robe itself mimics the traditional ceremonial gear of the Akan chiefs. With the fastidiousness of an accomplished parodist, the narrator tells us that Isanusi, the seer, masquerading as a chieftain, 'wore a high, gilded hat, woven in imitation of a crown'. The text's description of the hat projects a carbon copy of the golden crown-like hats traditionally worn by Akan paramount chiefs. The irreverent narrator then seals his sarcastic attack on the ostentation and self-glorification of the ancient chiefs of Africa with a sneer: 'A rainbow would have turned white with envy to behold his long robe' (p.162). The intimation that

royalty is driven by a craving for personal grandeur to inflate their hollow image to weird proportions is debunked by the hideous composition of the 'royal robe' which is crafted by Isanusi. We are told that Isanusi's royal 'accoutrement' is studded with 'pieces of broken metal, even bits from some white destroyer's shattered mirror, all were sewn in patches into *the screaming pattern of the gown proclaiming brilliant royalty*' (p.163, my emphasis).

So far my analysis exposes only how the text parodies the past political culture of the African chiefs and their addiction to flamboyance and self-grandeur. The narrative's vision of contemporary Africa is yet to come. The sentence 'Nor did Isanusi forget to add to his accoutrement a long fly-whisk, indispensable tool of all flyblown leadership' (p.163) graphically links the past to the present. In modern Africa most Africa leaders use the 'fly-whisk' to enhance their symbolic political power, their divine omnipotence and charisma. It is this bizarre political tradition of magnifying the self-image and the political image with an object traditionally designed for killing common house-flies that the narrator is, obviously, ridiculing when he scornfully describes the fly-whisk as the 'indispensable tool of all *flyblown* leadership'. That the narrator is consciously leading the reader to connect the past historical foibles of ancient god-like kings with the follies of contemporary African leaders is also seen in his manipulation of praise singing and praise names.

The obsession of the kings of pre-colonial Africa with hero-worshipping panegyrics and high-sounding praise epithets, also condemned in Mofolo's *Chaka* and Plaatje's *Mhudi*, is extensively satirized in this novel. The following praise song is a remarkable example of how praise poetry can be attuned to satire. Its artistry lies in its inclusion of actual praise names of contemporary leaders of Africa:

> We took turns composing, took turns singing the most extravagant praise songs to Kamuzu's vanity ... What spurious praise names did we not invent to lull Kamuzu's buffoon spirit?
>
> Osagyefo!
> Kantamanto!
> Kabiyesi!
> Sese!
> Mwenyenguvu!
> Otumfuo!
>
> Dishonest words are the foods of rotten spirits. We filled Kamuzu to bursting with his beloved nourishment. (p.170-171)

The genius of Armah's style lies in the fact that within the predominantly contemporary praise names of African leaders are embedded two praise names from Africa's ancient past - 'Kabiyesi' (Yoruba) and 'Otumfuo' (Ashanti). This device suggests that the tradition of flattery and self-glorification which characterizes the legendary tradition of the supernatural and god-like kings as exemplified by Sundiata, Emperor Mansa Musa I, Asantehene Agyeman Prempeh I, Shaka, Mzilikazi and others is faithfully emulated by contemporary African leaders. The first two praise names were used by the late Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana; 'Sese' is President Mobutu's praise name and 'Mwenyenguvu', which is a modern Swahili concoction, literally meaning "the Owner of Strength", is projected to caricature the East African political leaders like Julius Nyerere, Jomo Kenyatta and Milton Obote. The novel intimates that the past is frozen in the present. In a more elaborately parodied praise song, modelled on the Shakan *izibongo*, the narrator further ridicules praise singing. The reader is told '... we chanted more elaborate praises ..../ Osagyefo, courageous, skilled one who arrives to pulverize the enemy just when the enemy is exulting in imminent victory..../ Mzee, wisdom's own keeper' (p.172). It is interesting to note that 'Mzee', which literally means "Old Man", was the late President Jomo Kenyetta's praise name. This perception is persuasively presented by Ali A. Mazrui.

In his 'On Poet-Presidents and Philosopher-Kings', Mazrui contends that 'many of the first rulers of post-colonial African states' - '*philosopher-kings* or *philosophizing rulers*' - 'did view themselves as serious thinkers as well as neo-monarchical founding fathers' (1990:13). The African leaders project themselves like 'kings'. It is further argued that even *literary presidents* such as Agostino Neto of Angola and Leopold Senghor of Senegal have not been able to practise the humane and communal ideal they project in their poetry. Mazrui concludes that intellectual and highly educated African rulers are not in any way 'more benign towards opponents that rulers regarded as intellectually crude or primitive'. This intimates, ironically, that African writers (Mazrui included), who are now busy criticizing the African ruling elite may, if given the opportunity to rule Africa, become despots just like their predecessors.

Sam Ogundele suggests that supernatural kings like Shaka anticipate the pseudo-divine modern African rulers who ape the god-like pre-colonial African legendary kings. Thus in his 'Orality versus Literacy in Mazisi Kunene's *Emperor Shaka the Great*', Ogundele says that 'It is interesting how much Kunene's Shaka corresponds with the mystique of the semi-divine monarchs the several post-independence African leaders tried to build around themselves' (1992:22). Borrowing from Mazrui's earliest comment on this theme, which is discussed in his essay, 'The Monarchical Tendency in African Political Culture' (in *Violence and Thought* ... 1969:206-207), Ogundele declares that 'As itemised and analyzed by Ali A. Mazrui, this process of political mystification and personality-cult building combined at least four elements of political style: the quest for aristocratic effect; the personalisation of authority; the sacralisation of authority; and the quest for a royal historical identity' (1992:22). In his 'Dissidence and the African Writer: Commitment or Dependence' Oyekan Owomoyela also unmasks why 'such nationalist pioneers as Nanmdi Azikiwe, Kwame Nkrumah, Milton Obote and Leopold

Senghor' (op. cit.) thought it fit to veil themselves in the image of the fabulous god-like kings of pre-colonial Africa:

> The educated leaders of the African revolution were, of course, aware that the African masses had not been so affected by colonialism as to adopt European attitudes in place of the traditional, therefore, that they must be wooed with traditional inducements to accept leadership that did not derive from traditional symbols of power - chieftaincy titles and the regalia that went with, for example - and affected an adeptness in employing traditional strategies of communication and persuasion.
>
> (Owomoyela, 1981:85)

This syncretic approach to the maximization of political power worked so well for the 'old guards' that it has become, Ouologuem argues in *Bound to Violence*, the golden rule for becoming life-president in Africa. The sneering attitude of *Two Thousand Seasons* to this political culture of perpetuating the ancient legendary myths, clothed in eternal tyranny, is unveiled by Owomoyela's insight.

Another technique which is deployed to project the view that the political culture of tyranny and self-indulgence, which characterizes pre-Euro-Arab Africa, is emulated by both colonial and post-independent Africa is the symbol of the slave castle. The novel intimates that there is no difference between the treatment which is meted out to the ruled in pre-Euro-Arab Africa and that which is meted out to them by colonial and post-independent Africa. The work conveys this vision through its symbolic manipulation of the slave castle. Of Armah's five novels, it is only in *The Healers* that the slave castle, the symbol of European colonization and the slave trade, is not symbolically exploited.

By making the self-seeking Kamuzu occupy the slave castle after its capture and the killing of the European governor, the work intimates that the defeat of the Europeans and the capture of the slave fort does not change anything. The victory over the Europeans in the fort does not end the cycle of slavery, tyranny, and destruction; it only changes the

"colour" of these vices. It leads to Kamuzu's self-installation in the captured slave castle and his symbolic replacement of the slain European governor as exemplified by his inheriting all the governor's leftovers, including his bloated coloured woman, coupled with his fatal attempts to become a black carbon copy of the man he has helped the initiates and Isanusi to destroy:

> Kamuzu felt the call deep in his spirit to help himself to the departed destroyer's leftovers, and he did. Not only did he take the used woman for his own; he also coveted the dead white destroyer's servants, his clothes, everything he thought could make him more like a destroyer. (p.170)

The text explodes Kamuzu's transparently selfish motive by referring to it satirically as a calling. Africa's seduction by the European ethos permeates all Armah's five novels. This craving for the alien culture is, *Two Thousand Seasons* intimates, the root cause of past and present African rulers' propensity to collaborate with alien powers in order to exploit their own people and reduce them to servitude. Kamuzu's desperate efforts to ape the white governor reveal the general degradation of the African race from aboriginal communal wholeness and solidity of 'blackness' towards hollow 'whiteness'. The pathological striving by the slave to be like his former master assumes a central place in the novel. Kamuzu's behaviour also reinforces the destiny of African leaders and their world. The novel suggests that the racial odyssey of the African and his world will continue to lead either to the slave ship or the slave factory until Anoa's prophecy is completely fulfilled. Similarly, the defeat of the notorious King Koranche does not stop the destructive wheel of the chiefs. All events in the novel have built-in repercussions which negate all actions. The novel maintains, through this symbolic patterning of the slave castle, that there has neither been any emancipation nor birth of a new Africa. What we have is a cycle of abortions. The difference between the former and latter is that 'the new slave trader' conceals his true identity behind his blackness. Only the

self-illuminated and lunatic seers can see through this wall of veils and identify the ugly reality beneath. This interpretation is powerfully conveyed in *The Washington Post*:

> Since independence in Africa, government has been seen as the personal fiefdom a leader uses to accumulate wealth for himself, his family, his clan. He cannot be subjected to criticism by anyone, and everything he says is final. The apex of this notion of owning government is the idea of a life president like Hastings Banda of Malawi.
>
> Once they replaced the colonial rulers, they wanted to become just like them. They wanted to be all-powerful and omnipresent. We just replaced white faces with black faces.
>
> (*The Washington Post*, Sept 9, 1991:A20, cited in Ayittey, 1992:9-10)

Two Thousand Seasons projects an endless cycle of ironic reversals and a series of seduction by appearances. The complex web of ironies of inversion which dominates this work illuminates the irreversible physical and moral degeneration which permeate the novel. It is interesting to note that every action in *Two Thousand Seasons*, whether adverse or favourable, prepares the way for further enslavement, destruction and moral degeneration as predicted by Anoa. One of the most interesting examples of this ironic inversion is the flight of Anoa's people from the desert predators and their arrival at Anoa, a physical paradise, watered by a network of rivers, waterfalls, lakes, and all shapes and forms of water - the antithesis of the barren desert they have escaped from. This illusion of paradise and the notion of the mythical promised land is quickly dispelled by the omniscient narrator who sees the future: 'The sand [desert] had brought us woe. Water, this same living, flowing water of the river itself, *water* would bring worse deaths to us' (p.58).

The huge situational irony projected by the text is the fact that Anoa's people associate the desert with death and barrenness while water symbolizes fruition and regeneration. The life-generating physical beauty of Anoa - 'water hanging clear, water too open to hide the veined rock underneath,

water washing pebbles blue and smooth black, yellow like some everlasting offspring of the moon, water washing sand, water flowing to quiet meetings with swift Esuba, to the broad, quiet Su Tsen, river washing you, Anoa, water washing you' - (pp.56-57) suggests regeneration and rebirth - an intimation of the end of the woes and enslavement perpetrated by the Arab 'predators'. It is clearly evident that Armah designs a cyclic structure for *Two Thousand Seasons* in order to reinforce the cycle of betrayals, servitude, destruction and tyranny symbolized by Anoa's prophecy. The futile cycle of enslavement and destruction is repeatedly reaffirmed throughout *Two Thousand Seasons* by means of ironic twists, paradoxes, and narratorial intrusions: 'True it is, we have known other sources of despair: the knowledge that a people may flee predators only to find destroyers, escape whiteness coming from the desert only to collide with worse whiteness coming from the sea' (p.203). The narrator maintains that there is no escape for Anoa's people: 'We came away from the *desert*'s edge thinking we were escaping the causes of our disintegration. The causes running deepest were twin: among us had arisen a division between producers and parasites.... We came from the desert's edge thinking we were fleeing ruin, but its deepest causes we carried with us to new places' (pp.58-59). The wheel of physical destruction and spiritual decay is fated to roll on. The process of moral putrescence and violence generated by slavery as portrayed by the novel and symbolized by Anoa's prophecy are, like the liminal period in initiation, inevitable. No one can transcend Anoa's prophecy. If we pull all the narrative strands of the ironic reversals together, we get an intricate web of cycles which begin to look like a spiral. All actions and movements in the novel lead to only one destination: nowhere!

The initiates' victory on board the slave ship and their homecoming as exemplified by Dovi's experience on arrival in Anoa do not project any notion of emancipation. The entire experience is a green-horn initiation. The text projects two

Anoas: the ideological and the physical. The first Anoa is a physical homecoming of an initiate who has not yet achieved self-illumination after going through the ordeal of running the slave circuit. He stands to be caught and sold again. The second Anoa is an ideological homecoming to Anoa by an initiate who has successfully achieved self-awareness which enables him to identify all the traps designed to ensnare him and he does not commit Dovi's blunder of being caught and sold again by his own relatives who have become middlemen for the slave traders. That a mere return to Anoa is not a victory because 'their real enemy, the eternal middlemen among their own kind, are merely waiting to sell them off again' is brilliantly debunked by Wole Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976:113). This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that on their arrival at Anoa, the initiates discover that King Koranche and the European slave traders have established a full blown slave market. This critique, therefore, queries the interpretation which perceives the return of the initiates to Anoa after their successful revolt within the slave ship as the ultimate freedom predicted by Anoa.

Like the initiates' later destruction of the slave castle, the escape from the slave ship and physical arrival in Anoa cannot reverse the wheel of tyranny and slavery. Neither does the defeat of the notorious King Koranche stop the destructive cycle of the chiefs, for his retarded son, Bentum, white-washed and renamed George Bradford, is imposed upon the people by the European colonizers as an imperialist stooge masquerading as the king of Anoa. Thus all events in the novel have built-in boomerangs which negate their actions. The illusory victory of the destruction of the slave castle is negated when it is rebuilt through forced and slave labour. These ironic twists confirm how all the achievements by the initiates have been neutralized and the state of affairs has returned to what it had always been: a world ruled by 'moronic' chiefs who sell their people into slavery.

There is the suggestion that the politics of villainy and megalomania generated by tyranny, slavery, and slave culture worsens with the passage of time.

The symbol of the slave castle naturally leads to the novel's elaborate delineation of the Middle Passage. The most enigmatic episode, which reveals the narrator's view of slavery and the slave trade, is its handling of the manner in which initiates, who have gone through a traditional initiation ceremony designed to prepare them for life, end up in the bowels of a European slave ship through the betrayal of King Koranche, the expected defender of traditional heritage and racial purity. *Two Thousand Seasons* recreates the bottomless pit of the trails of the Middle Passage by subjecting the initiates to an actual experience in the corrosive belly of a slave ship. The novel intimates that although in contemporary Africa physical slavery is a thing of the past, covert forms of servitude and the slave mentality live on. The various forms of achievement and victory presented by the novel are also projected as nothing but illusions of the ultimate freedom which is prophesied by Anoa.

This view is conveyed and enacted through Abena's ritualistic initiation dance of love which is expected to lead to procreation. Although Abena, who is one of the women visionaries in this novel, is located in the present, she divines both the past and the future. Like Ama Nkroma in *The Healers*, Naita in *Why Are We So Blest?*, Naana in *Fragments*, and the Teacher in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Abena's ritual dance is pregnant with ancient wisdom and insights like the *Afa* divination[14]. Like the Prophetess Anoa, Abena is endowed with all-seeing eyes akin to those of Legba[15], the messenger deity (whose European counterpart is Hermes), and the 'master of crossroads', who sits astride the divine and the human world. The insights conveyed by the

dance are communicated through the medium of icons - visual signs dramatized by body movements and facial expressions:

> To the heavy, slow beat she had requested *Abena did a dance like the dance of birth, the dance of awakening, but as if the birth she danced would be a reluctant birth, a possible abortion, even.* For though Abena had more than enough time and supple skill in abundance she never carried the dance to its proper end. *Always when the end came near,* with an imperceptible change in her movement *Abena returned to the beginning, to the slow, heavy, mournful steps of blindness ignorant of sight, the steps of flesh not yet inspired.* She chose an arbitrary end when, staring fixedly at us, *she shook like a person surprised in some sly trap, shook with a fury that seemed aimed at us ... and then abruptly she halted her unfinished dance.* (p.107, my emphasis)

The verbalization of Abena's initiation dance speaks for itself. But its coded mystical icons are nothing but meaningless body movements to the initiates who have not yet attained self-illumination. They are infected, the text intimates, with dim-wittedness induced by the slave culture. The ritual dance also predicts what awaits the neophytes in the cavernous belly of the slave ship. The ironic reversal of their initiation, which is likened to an expected birth which ends in abortion, is epitomized by Abena's dance - a symbolic configuration which re-enacts her previous verbal warning to the naive initiates. But like the verbal warning, its insight is blocked by an ancient wall of veils and is not understood. It also presages the ironic cycle of reversals this world is fated to go through - the whirlwind of mirages and the illusions Africa is ordained to suffer before the 'Beautyful Ones' are finally born. The huge promises which end in disillusionment; the rosy picture of paradise which independence will shower on man and his world; the glorious conception of a world about to give birth to a child with magical powers. The 'slow, heavy, mournful steps' of the dancer suggest that delivery might not be easy. It might 'be a reluctant birth, a possible abortion.'

Let us now probe the initiates' experience and escape from the slave ship - the event which is erroneously perceived by

some critics as the final emancipation promised by Anoa. This episode illustrates what the narrator perceives as Africa's naivete, symbolized by cycles of betrayals and illusions. Though Armah's unfinished saga indicts the Europeans and the Arabs for propping up the indigenous slave-kings against their own people and for deploying imperialist stratagems in making the African believe that 'He has no culture, no civilization, no long historical past', to borrow from Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967:34), it castigates also the African, the victim, for his naive acceptance of the colonial myth that the African 'is not a man' (Fanon, 1967:8). Fanon's conceptualization of the trauma of slavery and colonization echoes the novel's didactic orientation:

> At the risk of arousing resentment of my colored brothers, I will say that the black is not a man. There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinary sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born.
>
> (Fanon, 1967:8)

The corrosive power of the pathological collapse of 'non-being' has only one cure: to become white; at least to look white. The feeling of 'non-being' and allowing this pseudo-self to usurp the real being can only stem from structural flaws within the Black world. Like Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* or like the anonymous protagonist in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the Blackman must bear the responsibility for being fooled into joining 'an existential race' which leads to servitude and invisibility. The novel contends that the *Abibiman* must blame himself for swallowing Prospero's 'water with berries' like Shakespeare's Caliban and becoming permanently enslaved by the European ethos. The initiates ignore Isanusi's advice and fall for King Koranche's trap baited with "shiny gifts", and a "sumptuous" European feast on board the slave ship:

> Further, the king wanted us to know he had thought of a sort of gift for us: the feast at the initiation's end would this season be the first of its kind, entirely different from any there had ever been among our people. He had prevailed upon the white men his friends to call

> us aboard their ship. We were to be the first black people in the world to feast with the white strangers as their guests and *to get gifts of appreciation from them at the ending of our youth.* (pp.105-106, my emphasis)

The 'two thousand seasons' of the agonizing cycle of the Middle Passage tribulations that Anoa predicts and which this world has been struggling to transcend since the beginning of its racial odyssey, is about to close in on the initiates. They have closed their eyes to the inner warnings of their native psyche and wit and must pay dearly for this metaphysical blindness. They turn deaf ears to the intuitive warnings of Abena:

> What were we going to the feast to celebrate when the integral way of our ancestors had been so forgotten, when the feasting has become an end in itself, a senseless gorging? Or did we not see the form of the feast had grown stupid? The ritual feast was now to take place on the white people's ship, vessel of destruction, merely because the chief had a whim. (p.106)

The majority of the initiates are projected like 'insiders' whose native wit has been blunted or 'insiders' who have no 'passwords' to the hidden meanings of Africa's sacred grove. Even the omniscient seer, Isanusi's advice has failed to pierce through the veil of blindness and naivete:

> If you knew who you were ... you would accept no invitations from black men who call white people friends. Such unnatural friendships are fed by bloody interests. You live to be their victim. (p.106)

It appears Isanusi is right: only through the baptism of agonized suffering can true self-illumination be achieved. Armah's protagonists, and they include his corporate one in this novel, are unwittingly engaged in a green-horn initiation which ushers in nothing except self-illumination. The fall of the initiates to King Koranche's deception unmasks how easy it is to enslave a world that is derailed from its indigenous ethos and which is nurtured in alien culture and local tyranny. This scene also confirms a number of thematic formulations: the responsibility of the rulers in the institutionalization of slavery; the role of the ancient

chiefs in the degeneration of Africa's rituals and heritage; and Africa's seduction by European culture and its lifestyle. The preoccupation of *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers* with slavery and the role of the indigenous rulers in its institutionalization is debunked by Arhin's view on the pervasive effect of slavery in pre-European and contemporary Akan society, particularly Asante, the pillar of institutionalized slavery in pre-colonial and colonial Ghana. Arhin asserts that:

> The free born had the chance of occupying royal stools, even if they were only those of lineage headships. First-generation slaves, whether war captives, *nnonum*, or purchased, *nnonkofo*, could not occupy even minor headships of palace associations. The *nnonkofo*, in particular, had the *disadvantage of tribal marks which, since they evoked contempt*, would diminish the effectiveness of their authority ... One may observe *in Asante villages, even today, that there is contempt, though concealed, for the descendants of slaves:* concealed because it is well known that it is forbidden by Asante indigenous law for people outside the lineage of the nominal slave owner to refer to the slave origin of the descendants of slaves[16] But while explicit reference to slave origins is forbidden, and rarely occurs, *it is clear from funeral ceremonies that slaves are regarded as belonging to a separate category of people. They are buried outside the burial grounds of the free descent groups;* and the groups of official mourners do not include as many allied family groups as one finds in the case of the free-born (Rattray, 1929:44). *The segregation of the deceased slaves from deceased free-born in the burial place clearly shows the marginality of slave descendants to Asante society;* and also that their "absorption" into the lineages of their owners was superficial.
>
> (Arhin, 1983:11-12, my emphasis)

The ritual facial marking of the slaves to identify them from the free-born and the contempt this draws from the society confirm the debilitating effects of indigenous slavery in Africa. The reference to the segregation of deceased free-born and deceased slaves who are interred outside the burial grounds of the free-born in present day Asante villages - the hollowness, the hypocrisy of royalty coupled with the demonic exploitation of humanity which the despotic culture of slavery evokes - reveal the thrust of Armah's fictional

histories. The same slaves, whose blood is good enough for the Asante deities in ritual sacrifices and who are killed and buried together with the deceased Asantehenes in the royal mausoleum, are not allowed to be buried in the village burial grounds of the free-born! It is this idiocy and foulness of the African kingship rituals that Armah targets in his works.

This thematic thread is highlighted by King Koranche's sale of the initiates into slavery. The initiation ceremony, which is designed to prepare these youngsters for a promising future, leads them into the shackles of the slave trader:

> "But no one can wear them," laughed the king. "The circles, the circles. They are too small for the wrists and ankles like ours. How can these my children get their jewels on?" He laughed, a happy, demented, high-pitched laugh. (p.109)

The European slave traders, with the help of King Koranche and his courtiers, have managed to put the gullible initiates into chains by fooling the young initiates into believing that the chains meant to yoke them to the slave ship are 'precious jewels ... bangles and anklets of a special kind' (p. 109). The narrator intimates that this is a classic example of how easy it is to fool Black Africa. The novel suggests that Africa's existential road from the beginning in ancient times to the present has been fraught with servitude and tyranny which will continue to plague the black people till real emancipation is finally achieved. Anoa's prophecy has become the existential destiny of the 'dark' continent - a cruel fate which no mortal can circumvent. Anoa's warning about the corrosiveness of death through slavery has been actually experienced by the initiates.

The decay, the squalor, and the odour which the initiates are subjected to in the filthy belly of the slave ship echo the accumulative rot, decay, and the smell which envelop the 'newly-born babies' - the 'small boy', Koomson and the Man - as they emerge after their heretical birth through the

latrine hole into the world portrayed by *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. The initiates are physically oppressed by the squalor and the odious odours within the belly of the slave ship:

> Cleanness became a mere remembrance visiting our minds ... Dirt then was our entire surrounding. The air itself had turned to liquid filth. Each body lay immobile in its own refuse. (p.126)

The filth and the abominable stench which reign supreme over the microcosmic world of the slave ship are given more elaborate treatment in Armah's first novel, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, which depicts a symbolic portrayal of the fictive world as a huge monstrous latrine. This is not only logical, but follows naturally from the ancient 'liquid filth' of the slave ship and the population of huge 'worms' which feed on the living bodies of the initiates:

> What had frightened the courageous soft-voiced one himself? He felt his right side thinking to find blood from the wound left there. It was not blood he found but a thing that felt like a soft worm. After the first scream he understood it was not alone. How had he lived with worms eating him so near the surface of his skin? What new disease had added itself to his pains and ours? (p.127)

The multi-dimensional forms of death meted out by slavery to its victims is thus being unfurled. Though physically alive, the initiates are spiritually dead. Death begotten by slavery dissolves not only the flesh but the soul too. The mythological breath of the novel is being invested with creative life; the visionary spirit of the text fused with the material body of the realistic recreation of the hell of actual slavery. The initiates have made a shocking discovery which brands Anoa's prophecy of doom into their drugged minds - slavery brings a new kind of death:

> I will not reach their destination. I am already destroyed.
> What will they do to us if we die so?
> They will throw us into the sea.
> Ancestors, this death is so new. We cannot join you. We cannot even be wandering ghosts.
> No. This is a complete destruction, death with no returning. (p.127)

The horrors of slavery include not only the loss of metaphysical vision and acquisition of invisibility but it also leads to the termination of all access to the world of ancestral spirits and the obliteration of reincarnation or re-birth. The text adds another dimension to the communal ethos: the notion of man investing his death so that future generations can benefit from it. The 'soft-voiced one', who has all the attributes of an ancestral spirit masquerading in human shape, reveals this insight - a sensibility formulated in *Two Thousand Seasons* as 'the quality of death we choose' (p.199) and further elaborated upon thus:

> A man with a soft voice ... said once it would be foolish for anyone to kill himself just like that. If we were truly resolved to die, he said, we should find ways to use our death to help those left behind. That would be the only intelligent dying. (p.125)

The nameless man sets a memorable example of the need to 'invest' one's death so that others can benefit from it. The order has been given to John, the black slave-driver, whose job is to brand the slaves, to throw the emaciated but living body of the 'soft-voiced one' into the sea. The relevant section of this symbolic event is cited in full for explication (pp.131-132):

> The slave-driver carried the soft-voiced one like a beast hunted down and killed ... But half-way to the open entrance all things changed. The soft-voiced one ... a lifeless corpse, became in a moment a determined, furious being, potent as some irresistible natural force. In a moment too swift for the following eye he braced his legs around the slave-driver's trunk ... Now the soft-voiced one held open the slave-driver's mouth and in one movement of amazing speed swung his own exhausted, emaciated, tortured body upward so that the two heads were on a level, his mouth next to the slave-driver's. The slave-driver gave a shuddering jerk, but the grip of the soft-voiced one was strong. The soft-voiced one brought his mouth exactly together with the slave-driver's and then - incredible obedience to will - we saw him with our own eyes bring up all the bile and dead blood from within his body into his mouth, and this mixture he vomited forcefully into the slave-driver's now captive mouth. The slave-driver grew mad with a desperate rage. He tried to tear the sick man's head away from his. In vain. His chest heaved, refusing at first to swallow the deadly vomit from the sick man's

> mouth. In vain: the sick man's mouth was stuck to the slave-driver's like a nostril to its twin. It was not to be separated by any force outside the sick man himself. *The deadly vomit was twice rejected by the struggling slave-driver. Three times the dying man refused to let it escape harmless on to the ship's wood below. Three times the dying man held the virulent juices, rejected, in his own mouth and throat. Three times with increasing force he pushed them down the slave-driver's reluctant throat. The third time the slave-driver's resistance was broken and the sick man shared death with him, allowing not one drop to escape.* Chocking, the slave-driver swallowed death with the breath of remaining life. Then he fell to the floor with the soft-voiced one still inseparable from him. (pp.131-132, my emphasis)

This gothic narrative reveals some of the innovative modes deployed by this novel in order to achieve its purpose. The futile attempts by John, the naive slave-driver, to destroy his own people so that he can move from 'blackness to whiteness' is violently thwarted when his mouth is permanently fused to that of the diseased, decayed and half-dead body of the 'soft-voiced one', the slave John is about to throw into the sea. This fusion of the clean and the living with the filthy, the decomposed, and the smelly is a re-enactment of the fictive world of the novel: a world ruled by 'perverts', 'parasites' and 'congenital fools'. The status reversal which the slave-driver is submitted to is similar to that suffered by all the characters in *Two Thousand Seasons*. Not only has he been shackled to the place of the nameless slave he has been ordered to kill, but his dreams have also been shattered. Worse than the reversal he has suffered, his illusory paradise is horribly terminated with the dreadful death he is about to mete out to the sick man which not only infects him too but terminates his life as well.

This climactic scene is also a microcosm of Armah's unfinished chronicle, for it is the kernel tale which embodies both the muted hope and the doom of Anoa's prophecy. This slave episode is also a teleological crucible, projecting the end of the 'two thousand seasons' which constitute the liminal period of Africa's racial rites of

passage. Later, we see how the initiates defeat their captors and achieve their freedom - an illusory emancipation which is nothing but a transitional stage in the struggle for genuine independence. The illusion of victory, as I have already suggested, is quickly dispelled when we weigh the accumulative effect of the ironic reversals which inform and shape this text. Let us now take another look at some of the controversial critical pronouncements on the novel.

Many critics, such as Lindfors, Petersen and others, suggest that the novel presents pre-Euro-Arab Africa as a non-violent paradise which is destroyed by Arabs and Europeans. I question this interpretation, for, though the surface manifestation of the text projects this perception, the mythological-cum- allegorical structure enshrined in Anoa's prophecy dispels any illusion of paradise. Besides this, the novel conceals hints of textual evidence which discount such simplistic deductions. To repudiate this interpretation, let us subject the Euro-Arab prehistoric Africa presented by the novel to textual scrutiny. The pre-Euro-Arab fictional world of the novel, as already outlined, is ruled by an elected body of patriarchs called 'caretakers'. This august body, which is initially seen as the repository of African cultural treasures and moral purity, degenerates into a corrupt and tyrannical system which finally transforms elected positions into hereditary status - kingship which, the novel claims, is of Arabian origin. The omniscient narrator admits that 'our knowledge' of the origins 'is fragile' because either 'all is in fragments' or 'completely lost in that ashen time':

> Nothing good has come to us of that first time. The remembrance is of a harsh time, horrid, filled with pains for which no rememberer found a reason, chocked with the greed, laziness, the contempt for justice of men glad to indulge themselves at the expense of their own people. The time's tale is of jealous, cowardly men determined to cling to power, and the result of that determination: the slaughter of honest people, the banishment of honest words, the raising of flattery and lies into the authorized currency of the time, the reduction of public life to an unctuous interaction.
> (p.9)

The narrator explicitly leaves the reader in no doubt as to the period he is describing: 'Nothing good has come to us of that *first time*'. The key expressions like 'a harsh time, horrid, filled with pains'; men 'choked with greed, laziness'; 'men glad to indulge themselves at the expense of their own people'; the 'tales of jealous, cowardly men determined to cling to power'; 'the slaughter of honest people, the banishment of honest words, the raising of flattery and lies into the authorized currency of the time'; unequivocally suggest a social and political mayhem and not a 'non-violent paradise' as Lindfors and Petersen maintain. What is revealing about the above narrative, which depicts pre-Euro-Arab Africa during the reign of 'caretakers', is the fact that the weaknesses of the African progenitors are exactly the same as the shortcomings which mark both the rule of Euro-Arab colonizers and that of the leaders of contemporary Africa. The narrator, intent on branding the message into the mind of the reader, adds that 'Below the powerful the ordinary multitudes, in their turn seized by the fever of jealous ownership, turned our people into a confused competition of warring gangs, each gang under its red-eyed champion seeking force or ruse to force its will against the others'. This civil war leads to the destruction of the rule of 'caretakers', ushering in the rule of women. We are told that 'In the end it was this hot greed itself that destroyed the power of the men' and 'it was left to women to begin the work of healing'. It must be reiterated that all this happened before the advent of Arabs, who are said to arrive as beggars during the reign of women - an epoch which creates a physical superabundance described either as 'a fertile softness' or as 'a fertile time' (p.12).

Interpreting the patterning of this 'fertile time' as a 'Garden of Eden' does not, however, convey the intended deeper insight of the of the text. The 'non-violent paradise' view presented by Petersen and Lindfors is based on the text's description of peace and material abundance which

text's description of peace and material abundance which dominate the rule of women. A surface or literal analysis of the extracts dealing with this period presents only an illusion of paradise:

> The peace of that *fertile time* spread itself so long, there was such an abundance of every provision, anxiety flew so far from us, that men were able to withdraw from even those usual jobs they claimed they were holding themselves ready for, and their absence left no pain. (p.10)

> *A fertile softness enfolded all our life.* Ease, the knowledge tomorrow would sing as sweetly as the present day, made all willing to forget the past, to ignore the future. Past and future, neither weighed unpleasantly upon our mind. (p.12, my emphasis)

The literal constructs of the extracts which are constantly cited in support of the paradise interpretation reveal only the surface meaning of the 'fertile time' narratives. Concealed underneath the superficial paradise discourse is the deeper insight - the intended meaning which is reconcilable with the Anoa mythological crucible which informs and shapes the novel - Africa's seduction by external appearances. What is perceived by some critics as a 'Garden of Eden', the narrator projects as an occasion for lamentation: 'Fertile had been the rule of women, but its fruit had become a forgetfulness of our own defence' (p.26). The period of physical abundance during the reign of women is only an illusion which conceals a more insidious form of servitude to women and Arab slavery for the larger community. The results of the period of peace and material wealth confirm this perception. The 'softness' which enslaves all life is a corrosive moral disease which turns men into parasites and prepares the way for the second conquest by the Arabs:

> But already the ahey[17] had brought forth a strange, new kind of man, his belly like a pregnant woman's, of habit to consume more food and drink than he gives out in work and energy. (p.11)

The taste for the life of indolence and pleasure acquired during the rule of women has changed the men completely. They now have only one aim in life: to make permanent the parasitic life which they acquired and enjoyed during the reign of women. The establishment of hereditary rule, which replaces the democratic rule of 'caretakers', is also triggered by the parasitic life of laziness and ease that the men enjoyed during the period of peace and plenty:

> For this the men - opprobrium fill their new-grown paunches - showed no extraordinary stomach, preferring to sit in the shade of large bodwe trees or beneath the cool of the huts built by women, drinking ahey, breathing the flattery air of the shade, in their heads congratulating the tribe of men for having found such easy means to spare itself the little inconveniences of work while yet enjoying so much of its fruit.... (p.10)

The other adverse result of what is interpreted as a paradise is that the men have become very *soft, fat, and weak,* losing all desires and skills to fight and to defend their fatherland. The upshot of this is that the Arabs, who had been defeated and driven away by the harem women, have come back. Working together with men who have enjoyed parasitic living and want to enjoy it permanently, the predators have no difficulty in taking over the land for the second time. The second conquest of the fictional world of the novel is more debilitating than the first because a new method of enslavement, which produces devastating results, has been introduced by the desert predators - the method that ensures physical and spiritual enslavement. The reader is told 'The white men from the desert had made a discovery precious to predators and destroyers: the capture of the mind and the body both is a slavery far more lasting, far more secure than the conquest of bodies alone' (p.33).

The re-created past presented by this novel does not suggest a paradise because the key sentence, 'A fertile softness enfolded all our life', is linked to the patterning of the 'softness' image which permeates Armah's five novels. The words, 'softness', 'smoothness', and 'fatness' have been

repeatedly used in Armah's novels to denote the parasitic life of laziness, ease, and pleasure led by the ruling class of pre-colonial, colonial and contemporary Africa. These words symbolize infamy and moral disease. The novel satirizes a derailed world in which all human activities are reduced to a monstrous desire to satiate physical needs. This life-style, the text intimates, has become a powerful instrument of domination deployed by alien intruders desirous to rule Africa. We are told that the Arabs, who train the slaves to become askaris, control them through their physical desires:

> To reduce them [the askaris] to things the predators fed their bodies, indulging their crassest physical wants promptly, overflowingly. The predators fed them huge meals of meat and drink and added abundant dagga for their smoking. The predators supplied them with women and watched their copulation as another kind of sport. Such was the askaris' life. From morning till sleep they were either at some sport, eating, drinking, copulating, smoking or defecating... The new-found end of their lives was how to keep from doing anything different from the hollow cycle of shitting, smoking, fucking, drinking, eating, playing. (pp.29-30)

This narrative is the novel's hyperbolic description of the standard parasitic lifestyle adopted by past and present African rulers and their hangers-on. *Two Thousand Seasons* and Armah's other novels intimate that the above lifestyle becomes the dominant goal which all African notables, educated slave factors and rulers struggle to achieve. This perception is sustained throughout Armah's novel. *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* also highlights this 'hollow cycle of shitting, smoking, fucking, drinking, eating, playing' (p.30). To substantiate this thesis, let us take one illustration from *The Healers*. Soon after Ababio has successfully seized the Esuano throne after having the rightful heir, Prince Appia, demonically butchered, Densu observes changes in *King* Ababio: '*He looked fatter; his skin looked oilier*' (*The Healers,* p.298, my emphasis).

This patterning of the image of 'softness', 'obesity' and 'smoothness' which denotes parasitic living is further

employed in satirizing the corrupt and parasitical life of Koomson in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*:

> The man, when he shook the hands, was amazed at the flabby softness of the hand. Ideological hands, hands of revolutionaries leading their people into bold sacrifices, should these hands not have become even tougher than they were when their owner was hauling loads along the wharf? And yet these were the socialists of Africa, *fat, perfumed, soft with the ancestral softness of chiefs, who had sold their people and are celestially happy with the fruits of the trade.*
> (*The Beautyful Ones*, p.131, my emphasis)

The novel provides irrefutable textual evidence to substantiate the critical perception that the vices of traditional chiefs begot the present vices of modern rulers of Africa. The novel aims at identifying and eradicating the old frailties in order to destroy the present follies. Although the interpretation that pre-colonial Africa was a non-violent paradise which was polluted by the advent of Arabs and Europeans is rejected, it is contended that the nourishment responsible for the unnatural growth rate of the rot and disintegration of Africa was, however, provided by the alien intrusion.

In the light of the above analysis, it is impossible to conclude that *Two Thousand Seasons* presents prehistoric Africa as a paradise. The passage containing the key sentence, 'A fertile softness enfolded all our life', creates only an illusion of paradise. The period of peace and material abundance is nothing but a transitional stage in the ongoing period of decay and disintegration foretold by the Priestess, Anoa. That the conditions created by this phase of Africa's history prepares the way for the second Arab conquest of the fictional world reaffirms this view. The views of Lindfors and Petersen that Armah suggests in *Two Thousand Seasons* that prehistoric Africa is paradisal seem to be sustained only at the surface level. I further take issue with Petersen's comment that 'While Ouologuem seems to think that violence is indigenous to the African, Armah reaches the conclusion that the African is an innocent victim of foreign

aggression' (Petersen, 1976:331). The textual evidence reviewed above does not validate Petersen's interpretation. What appears paradisal to Lindfors and Petersen is only a transitional stage which prepares the way for a more soul-crushing form of slavery. This constant ironic twist, which transforms all favourable events into disasters, is consonant with Anoa's prophecy. The rule of women, which follows the civil wars which see the destruction of the rule of the first fathers, is regarded as the time of peace and abundance - a paradise. This period, however, like all other illusory victories and achievements, must submit to the supreme cycle of ironic inversion which negates all events. The surface paradise is only a mirage which is finally negated by the embedded dominant vision - 'two thousand seasons' of slavery and destruction. The fact that the novel opens in *medias res* further confirms the ongoing process. The narrator begins his narration by asserting that '... have them ask us again how many seasons have flowed by since our people *were unborn*' (p.1) - not when our people were born.

Another textual piece of evidence which invalidates the paradisal view is the novel's manipulation of sexual immorality or the propensity of the patriarchs of this world for deflowering young virgins - a theme which permeates Armah's other works, particularly *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. The attempt by a progenitor, hunter Brafo's father, to kill his own son because he has been prevented by his son and his ward, Ajoa, the fifteen-year old, from gratifying his sexual greed, reveals neither 'superabundance of virtue' (Lindfors, 1980:89) nor a 'non-violent paradise':

> In the thirty-fourth season of Brafo's life his father - may like disasters strike those among our elders whose greed overwhelms their knowledge of the way - saw the amazing beauty of his own ward Ajoa and grew helpless before his dotard passion. The girl was in the thirtieth of her seasons[18], a few seasons' woman in body, in spirit still a child. Brafo's father was close to a hundred seasons ... The father, surprised by the discovery, was first struck impotent with rage, then maddened with desire to destroy both his son and the beloved child. (p.5)

It is crucial to note that the narrator deliberately locates this narrative-within-narrative in the pre-Euro-Arab period in order to draw the reader's attention to the state of affairs before the advent of the Arabs and Europeans. The obvious inference is that Lindfors's view that 'a superabundance of virtue ... is said to have existed in prehistoric Africa' (1980:89-90) is an incorrect interpretation of the text.

Indeed, the weakness for young virgin girls, for which Armah's narrator censures the socialist politicians like Koomson in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, is already evident in the founding patriarchs, who form the backbone of the 'caretaker' government in prehistoric Africa. The Arabs cannot, therefore, be accused of introducing sexual greed and immorality into Africa. The seeds of physical and moral decadence already lurk in the progenitors. The Arab intrusion merely hastens and overwhelmingly amplifies the inevitable growth of the seed of decay, immorality, and degeneration.

The most often cited criticism of *Two Thousand Seasons* is the view that its reconstruction of Africa's historical experience is artistically unrealistic. As already pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, many reasons account for why *Two Thousand Seasons* is perceived by some critics as having failed to achieve novelistic realism. Part of the problem stems from the novel's unconventional structure and style. A novel which eschews detailed individual characterization and a single heroic ideal is certainly a departure from the Western novelistic tradition. The simulated epic oral style compounds the novel's un-European structure. Besides these, we have a collective disembodied incantatory narrative voice - a composite resonant voice akin to that of an African visionary possessed by ancestral spirits - which exercises supreme control over the text. Although the novel's unusual structure demands an un-European or a non-universal approach, most critics tend to approach it

as a standard European fiction. This critical perception is substantiated by Wright:

> *Two Thousand Seasons* does not purport to be a "novel" in any sense of the word and to approach Armah's daring experimentation with the techniques of indigenous African narrative forms with the critical assumptions governing discussion of European fiction is to mistake both the formal design and the spirit of his book.
>
> (Wright, 1989:222-223)

The above comment clearly warns against approaching *Two Thousand Seasons* as an orthodox European novel. Anyidoho (1986:67-70) also confirms the unconventional features of the novel by extending the debate to cover other African experimental writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ousmane Sembene and by arguing that some African writers insist on writing un-European fiction. Anyidoho maintains that African experimental novelists like Ngugi, Sembene and Armah have tried without success to convey to the reader how they should be approached.

The novel's didactic mode complicates matters. Scholes and Kellogg (1966) endorse my view that the novel's polemic structure and orientation contribute towards its dismissal as fantasy:

> Two persistent problems in definition tend to inhibit all discussions of fictional works in which intellectual considerations influence narrative structure.... One is the tendency to use the word "didactic" in a pejorative as well as in a purely descriptive senses. We are likely to think of a "didactic" narrative as one in which a feeble attempt is made to clothe ethical chestnuts in fictional form, resulting at best in a spoiled story. When the term is used in this sense it effectively begs all questions of judgement and appreciation. Our criticism may be improved if we strip the word of the unfortunate connotations it has acquired and allow "didactic" simply to refer to a work which emphasizes the intellectual and instructional potential of narrative, including all such works from simple fable which points an obvious moral to the great intellectual romance ....
>
> (Scholes and Kellogg, 1966:106)

This insight appears to explain Lindfors's and Achebe's distaste for *Two Thousand Seasons*. The other feature of the novel which is seriously queried is its rejection of chieftaincy in Africa and its intimation that monarchy might have been copied from Arabs. It is argued that modern Akan society is structured around kingship and the novel's rejection of monarchy amounts to a gross historical distortion. This study questions the view which projects history as one single objective entity. As B. [sic] Butterfield points out in his *The Historical Novel* (1924:15-16) there is no such thing as an objective and complete history because history offers man only snatches from the past. 'All history', Butterfield asserts, 'is full of locked doors, and of faint glimpses of things that cannot be reached.' Anyidoho endorses this concept of history when he declares that 'There is no such thing as *a complete history, a history* which represents the past as it truly was ... especially in the case of oral histories .... There is only a plurality of histories, each offering its special permutation of selected details, each serving the ideological needs of one group or another.... History, for all its claims of "objectivity," is full of the historian's biases, prejudices, even falsehoods' (1981-1982:109-110).

The confusing the debate on 'artistic reality in literature' is clarified by White's footnoted analysis of E.H. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (1960) and Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1968). White argues that both works miss the *'the crucial concept of historical representation' because they are preoccupied with '... what are the "historical" components of a "realistic" art?' instead of investigating '... what are the "artistic" elements of a "realistic" historiography?'* (White, 1973:3, my emphasis). White further concludes that:

> ... the whole discussion of the nature of "realism" in literature flounders in the failure to assess critically what a genuinely "historical" conception of "reality"

> consist of. *The usual tactic is to set the "historical" over against the "mythical", as if the former were genuinely empirical and the latter were nothing but conceptual, and then to locate the realm of the "fictive" between the two poles.* Literature is then viewed as being more or less *realistic*, depending upon the ratio of empirical to conceptual elements contained within it.
>
> (White, 1973:3, my emphasis)

The above discussions, coupled with White's thesis, explain some of the basic reasons behind this novel's interpretation either as 'a worthless work of art' or as 'an African masterpiece'. The self-conscious reinterpretative historical mode - a re-Africanised historiography - manipulated by Armah is articulated by D.S. Izevbaye in his 'Time in the African Novel'. Izevbaye writes:

> The black world is similarly evolving its own interpretation of history in the light of its past experience and present needs. This is the new black historiography, exemplified in the works of Cheikh Anta Diop and Chancellor Williams. This reinterpretation of the history of the black man
> has provided the basis for a different form of the African novel - a historical novel which seeks to enhance a greater span of time than was usual, so that the whole of the colonial period may be seen in context. This long shot occurs in *Two Thousand Seasons*.
>
> (Izevbaye, 1982:81)

Though Armah's novelistic histories are obviously influenced by the theses of the Black master historians, his fictional historical version of Africa does not conform with the recorded version of these academics. It is contended, therefore, that the deconstructed historical account which moulds this novel is transmuted by Armah's own creative vision and ideological biases.

The next area of critical debate is centred around the text's rejection of chieftaincy as an Arabian import. The novel's rejection of kingship as alien, possibly the result of Arab intrusions, is considered to be its greatest distortion of African history for, it is argued, monarchy has been the foundation stone of Akan society. Armah's rejection of the

Golden Age of pre-colonial Africa, together with the Akan-slave kings, is not an isolated personal creative vision but rather a gradual trend in African creative writing. Though Kofi Awoonor does not reject traditional hereditary rule as Armah does, his comment on his *This Earth, My Brother* in Bernth Lindfors's (ed.) *Palaver: Interviews with Five African Writers* (1972) rejects Africa's Golden Age which he saw fit to celebrate in the past:

> I saw the traditional society almost stupidly as a golden age, a beautiful and sinless kind of world. I no longer have that perception. I'm aware that corruption is an essential aspect of the human condition, and I'm aware that suffering comes out of that condition.
>
> (Awoonor, 1972:55)

Armah's censure of the African socialist leaders' reconstruction of an African personality distilled from the fabulous legendary past reveals his aversion to the god-like kings whose political subterfuges are faithfully emulated by modern African leaders. In his essay 'African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific?' (1967), Armah rejects the legendary

> ... tradition based on instances of past African opulence and magnificence, generally of a very vulgar, decidedly unsocialistic type, peppered with the names of famous kings and glorious empires.... As to the location in time and space of this virtuous old Africa, the available formulae are vague and at times unhistorical tales of kings dressed in scintillating robes, possessing countless slaves and spending gold with grand insouciance ....
>
> (Armah, 1967:22-24)

The suspicion that the legendary tradition and the warrior-kingship might have been assimilated from Arabian or Islamic sources is triggered by the absolute proprietorship exercised by Arab-Islamic history and culture over Mandingo oral traditions and grioture. David C. Conrad confirms this view in his 'Islam in Oral Traditions of Mali: Bilali and Surakata' (1985). We are told that in versions of oral epics on Sundiata (Sunjata), a figure called Bilali Bounama appears 'as a noble ancestor figure' or a progenitor of the Mandingo people. But strangely enough, the same personage, Bilali is described by Mandingo griots as 'a companion of the prophet

Muhammad, and at the same time they refer to him as the progenitor of one of the most distinguished of ancient Manding lineages, Sunjata's branch of the Keitas, all of which amounts to a claim that the Keitas are *ansar* or descendants of the Prophet's helpers'. Conrad concludes that 'Thus, when we first encounter Bilali Bounama we find him standing with one foot near the fountainhead of Islam and the other at the base of traditional Malian culture. And though Bilali figures prominently in descent lists that introduce one of the most important oral epics of West Africa, he originates in Arabian rather than Manding history' (Conrad, 1985:35). In D.T. Niane's *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (1965), the griot, Djeli Mamoudou Kouyate opens his tale by paying homage to the progenitor of the Keita family tree - Bilali! This allusion to Bilali as the head of the Keita lineage endorses Conrad's thesis and Armah's belief that African kingship was imported from Arabia. The griot asserts that 'Bilali Bounama, ancestor of the Keitas, was the faithful servant of the Prophet Muhammad (may the peace of God be upon him)' (Niane, 1065:3). This fetishization of Islamic orthodoxy in Mandingo/Malinke is explicated by Lemuel A. Johnson in his 'Crescent and Consciousness: Islamic Orthodoxies and the West African Novel.' Johnson argues that most Malinke artists, the griots and modern writers, are ideologically tethered to Islamic spiritualism and Arabian ontology which shapes and informs their creative projects.

Robin Horton's 'Stateless Societies in the History of West Africa' (in J.F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder eds., 1971) provides additional evidence which confirms the view that *Two Thousand Seasons* is grounded in a solid historical framework. The historical basis of the novel's dismissal of kingship as alien in origin is substantiated by the Hamitic Hypothesis which argues that the '*lack* of continuity' of kingship states in West Africa with the chiefless (stateless) states stems from the fact that kingship was imported from the Near East (Horton, 1971:109). The proponents of this hypothesis also

contend that the "divine kingship" which is 'characteristic of all West African states ... has very strong affinities with the kingships of the ancient Near East' and that 'the origin myths of West African kingships do not point to a non-negro origin, they *do* point to external origin' (Horton, 1971:107-108). Though Wright (1989:227) and Lindfors (1980:89) believe that only a few African societies, such as the Igbos, are 'acephalous communities' and dismiss *Two Thousand Seasons'* presentation of the notion of the 'kingless' Akan society as a flagrant distortion of African history, Horton's well-researched essay maintains that 'Altogether, there are probably some thirty-five million West Africans living under essentially stateless conditions' (Horton, 1971:75) and lists twenty-five of these in West Africa alone.

Besides the above discussions on the origin of kingship in Africa, there is the view expressed by J.D. Fage. In his *A History of Africa* (1978:67), Fage contends that monarchy might have been brought to Africa South of the Sahara from the Near East and from Arab North Africa by immigrant Africans. The question of kingless societies in Africa does not need to be resolved on evidence based only on the current kingless-kingship dichotomy in modern Africa. D.T. Niane's comment in *General History of Africa IV* (1984) questions the view which suggests that the development of kingless and monarchical states has been static. The art findings of Igbo-Ukwu in the heart of Ibgoland, historically categorized as a 'stateless' community, has led Niane to compare these with the art findings of Ife. From the comparative analysis of the art findings of the two politically different societies, Niane discovers that the traits of the Ife art findings, which were shaped and informed by a ritual monarchy, are similar to those of Igbo-Ukwu, which is traditionally classified as a 'kingless' community. Niane concludes that the art works of the two communities belong to 'the same culture' - 'a ritual monarchy'. Thus, Niane asserts that 'It

is believed that Igbo-Ukwu was the religious capital of a very vast kingdom, and that the treasures were stored there under the keeping of a priest-king, Ezi Nzi' (1984:362). It could, therefore, be argued that if a powerful ritual monarchy with sophisticated art culture could divest itself of the monarchical garb, then a kingless community could also later develop a kingship culture.

What is pertinent, however, is the fact that *Two Thousand Seasons* is set in an indeterminate period in prehistoric Africa - a predynastic epoch in Africa's historical rites of passage. In his *The Destruction of Black Civilization*, Chancellor Williams confirms not only the view that Africa experienced a "kingless" period but also defines and locates the predynastic period within its historical setting:

> This takes us back to the predynastic period about 4500 B.C.-- certainly not the beginning, but quite far enough. Many writers refer to the "kingless" periods before centralized states as the rule of nobles, oligarchies, etc. From the beginning, therefore, the Westerners applied Western concept to quite different African institutions. Later they described the same kind of societies as "chiefless" or, worse, "stateless". They did not understand the African constitutional system of *real* self-government by the people through their representatives, the Council of Elders ... During the predynastic period under discussion there were neither oligarchies nor hierarchies as these terms are understood in the West. In fact, the Western conception
>
> of kingship itself was foreign to traditional Africa. What the West called "king" was, in Africa, the same senior elder who presided at the Council of Elders, had to be elected ....
>
> (Williams, 1976:101)

Williams' excerpt reaffirms eloquently my contention that Armah's representation of prehistoric Akan society as a kingless community is grounded upon African historical evolution. Besides the above arguments, it must be pointed out that the novel is a fiction and not a factual, historical record of prehistoric Africa. James Simmons articulates this view in his *The Novelist as Historian: Essays on the*

Victorian Historical Novel. Commenting on the state of affairs after 1850 concerning the historical romance in 'The Decline of a Literary Fashion: The Historical Romance after 1850', Simmons asserts:

> ... there was a shift in the last three decades of the century away from the historical element in the genre and a general agreement on the part of the novelists, critics, and readers alike that the romancer's chief obligation was not to history but to the free exercise of his artistic imagination, unfettered by any demands for factual accuracy.
>
> (Simmons, 1973:62)

This is perhaps the most powerful rebuttal of the view that presents *Two Thousand Seasons* as 'a cartoon history' merely because it is perceived to have failed to satisfy 'the demands of factual accuracy'.

The last theme to be considered - a thematic concern which permeates all the five primary texts of this study - is the novel's repudiation of the servile role foisted upon women by traditional Africa. In order to intensify its vilification of the legendary tradition, *Two Thousand Seasons* orchestrates the subservient status imposed upon women by traditional Africa and its rulers, just like Mofolo's *Chaka* and Plaatje's *Mhudi* do. The novel maintains that before the advent of Arabs and Europeans, women emerge as the doers and the saviours who fill the political vacuum left by the caretakers after their destructive civil wars which end the rule of men. The novel portrays women as victims of centuries of servitude institutionalised by men. This male tendency to turn women into 'domestic servants' and sexual 'playthings', the text maintains, was in existence before the advent of the Arabs in Africa. The Arab slave culture and its reduction of women to sexual objects and the subservient position imposed upon them by the Islamic religion compound this indigenous African attitude to women. The structuring of the novel around the legendary female rebels, particularly the Anoas, and its allusion to one priestess Anoa, 'who brought the wrath of patriarchs on her head long before the beginning of fertile

time by uttering a curse against any man, any woman who would press another human being into her service' (pp.13-14) is Armah's creative attempt to reverse the secondary social position of African women. In his review of Ousmane Sembene's 'masterpiece ... a film called *Ceddo*' - a review article entitled 'Islam and "Ceddo"' (1984:2031) - Armah reveals an insight which appears to be his guiding principle in *Two Thousand Seasons*. Talking about the woman character who shoots the Muslim 'imam dead' in order to save her community from total disintegration, Armah asserts that:

> It is she - the woman - who brings the leadership the community's men have failed to provide, points the way out of the alienating traps the community has fallen into. ... And in the artistic vision it [*Ceddo*] projects, *the African woman occupies the clean centre, a thinker and a doer.* In other words, the meaning of Sembene's *Ceddo ranges beyond history and currency, into prophecy.*
>
> (Armah, 1984:2031, my emphasis

To effect this status reversal, the novel puts women in the centre of the liberation struggle against the slave-kings, their heirs, Africa's modern rulers, and their alien supporters. For this reason, most of the visionary characters of this work are women. They include Abena, Ndola, Idawa, Naita, Nandi, Noliwe, and others. Anyidoho echoes this interpretation when he declares that:

> The most prominent of Armah's women - Anoa, Idawa, and Abena - are all living portraits of the *Obaa Sima*, the concept of the ideal woman in Armah's native Akan culture. Armah refines for us not only the role of women but also the very notions of beauty and fertility. Each compels a notion of beauty that goes beyond the surface of things.
>
> (Anyidoho, 1986:76-77)

Anyidoho concludes that any discussion of collective heroism and the communal ideal in the novel must take cognisance of the 'crucial role of women in a meaningful revolutionary program' (1986:76). A textual analysis of the novel's portrayal of women confirms this perception. Brafo's father's sexual greed for his fifteen-year old ward opens the cycle of the servitude of women in the novel (pp. 5-6). The male

bigotry revealed during the period of 'fertile time' when women's labour has created material abundance needs scrutiny.

The rebuilding of the community after civil wars of destruction wrought by the rule of caretakers, we are told, is virtually accomplished by women. The men have become parasites who live solely on the women and have grown fat and oily like worms. The narrator tells us that the period of material abundance has produced 'a strange, new kind of man, his belly like a pregnant woman's' (p.11). The men intent upon continuing the life of ease and pleasure decree that women should not be allowed to rule and must be relegated to 'the childbearing, housekeeping destiny' (p.60). And so it is decreed by the patriarchs that 'as soon as' a woman's 'body showed it was ready, and as long as her body continued to turn manseed to harvest' she must be made to bear children. Those who refuse this child-bearing machine role, the narrator tells the reader, 'Their bodies sometimes floated naked down the river in the beauty of an early morning, their genitals mutilated for the warning of docile multitudes' (p.61). The text projects its vision by comparing the visionless and unproductive men with the women visionaries and doers.

The most graphic demonstration of the creativity and the visionariness of women is their uncanny and brilliant execution of the harem revolt which wipes out the depraved predators who turn the women into sex objects. In the narrator's own words, 'for them [the desert predators] woman is a thing, a thing deflated to fill each strutting, mediocre man with a spurious, weightless sense of worth' (p.40). The thematic and the ideological concerns of this unique episode are highlighted by Anyidoho's comment: 'The revolt of these women and their total massacre of the predators is one of the most impressive, most decisive single victories in the entire novel. This remarkable episode is marked throughout by the spirit of oneness that moves the women into a singular

display of poetic justice in killing their violators with "overflowing measures" of food, drugs, and sex' (1986:76). In her 'Parasites and Prophets: The Use of Women in Ayi Kwei Armah's Novels' (in C.B. Davies and A.A. Graves eds., 1986:101), Abena P. A. Busia concedes that although, to a large extent, women characters in Armah's first three novels are portrayed in rather restricted and pejorative terms, the characterization of women in *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers* is very positive. It is argued that women are portrayed in the novelistic histories as prophets, visionaries, and doers while men are generally presented as villains.

Like Mofolo's and Plaatje's works, *Two Thousand Seasons* thus links the suffering and the servitude of African women to that of Mother Africa. The most unambiguous substantiation of this view is Abena's ritual dance which closes the initiation ceremony. Through an ingenious process of foregrounding, the narrator succeeds in transforming Abena's ritual dance of love into a vision which projects Africa's past, present and future. The dance envisions Mother Africa's cycle of abortions - the endless cycle of betrayals and tribulations she has been subjected to since the dawn of history by her own rulers and alien intruders.

It is ironic that the novel which is criticized for portraying 'anti-racist racism' has emerged as a work whose anti-legendary and anti-traditional African posture has demolished the mythical Golden Age of pre-colonial Africa. It is equally evident that *Two Thousand Seasons* not only smashes Africa's legendary tradition in order to recreate a communally-oriented image for Africa but also de-mythologises the traditional Euro-Arab cultural superiority and shatters all imperialist historical versions of Africa's history. Thus, the novel re-fashions from the debris of what it has dismantled, a new African mythology, divested of all alien misrepresentations as well as the fabulous fabrications of

traditional African god-like kings and their beneficiaries, the modern African leaders.

NOTES

1. Lucius Sergius Catiline (c.109-62 B.C.) staged an unsuccessful conspiracy against the Roman Senate about 63-2 B.C.; his feelings towards that body are likened to Caesar's.

2. Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* was first published by East African Publishing House in 1973. All subsequent page references (in brackets) are taken from the 1979 Heinemann edition.

3. Abibiman, according to G.M. Dalgish's A Dictionary of Africanisms, is 'the archetypical black African'. The word is derived from the Akan root-word, *abibi* (African).

4. Kofi Anyidoho's 'Historical Realism and the Visionary Ideal: Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*' (1981-82:109) posits that no full understanding of Armah's work will be achieved as long as critics are confused over what 'historical realism' and 'artistic reality' in literature consist of.

5. Ato Sekyi-Otu's '"Toward Anoa ... Not back to Anoa": The grammar of revolutionary homecoming in *Two thousand seasons*' (1987) confirms the work's orature by declaring that the novel's 'narrative is ostensibly an epic account of the Africa experience from a pre-exilic era' (1987:192). This view is sanctioned by Derek Wright in his article, 'Orality in the African Historical Novel' (1988), which both questions and affirms the novel's assimilation of African folk narrative features by asserting that *Two Thousand Seasons* is an 'innovative narrative, pseudo-oral narrative, a simulated exercise, a literary affectation' (1988:97).

6. In his *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Victor Turner (1969:95-96) explicates rites of passage and 'liminal' conditions that exist between transitional passages of initiates from one state to another. This work also describes the relationships of the initiates under the period of 'liminality' - a relationship Turner calls "communitas". Turner's theory on symbolic structure and growth, and in particular his hypothesis that 'liminality' provides an alternative way for looking at works of literature, offers an illuminating pathway for entering Armah's novel.

7. Wole Soyinka's note "To the producer" in his (1965:44-45) *The Road* (1965:44-45) illuminates the image of 'threshold man' in African traditions. Murano, who is a state of 'transition from the human to the divine essence' because is wearing an ancestral mask during a ritual ceremony, is knocked down by a lorry. Just as Murano has become suspended between two worlds - the spiritual world and the material world - the novel depicts a world suspended while in transition. The transition, according to Anoa, is the multi-dimensional reaches of slavery. The African's

initiation entails moving from slavery to freedom. But things have gone upside down: like Murano who is knocked down by a lorry while in transition, the Abibiman and his world have been derailed by slavery and have become frozen in this transitional phase. Anoa predicts that this transition will take 'two thousand seasons' (one thousand years).

8. The use of 'legendary' to describe the novel's historical construct of pre-colonial Africa undermines the credence of Lindfors's thesis, for *Two Thousand Seasons* is overtly anti-legendary.

9. The degeneration of Bernth Lindfors's 'Armah's histories' (1980) into an angry emotional outburst is revealed by the intense derogatory and emotive words or phrases which dominate the article.

10. In Ime Ikiddeh's 'Ideology and Revolutionary Action in The Contemporary African Novel' (1986), Neil Lazarus's *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* (1990), Ato Sekyi-Otu's '"Toward Anoa ... Not Back to Anoa": The Grammar of Revolutionary Homecoming in *Two Thousand Seasons*' (1987), Isidore Okpewho's *Myth in Africa* (1983a) and 'Myth and Modern Fiction: Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* (1983b) and Abena P.A. Busia's 'Parasites and Prophets: The Use of Women in Ayi Kwei Armah's Novels' (in C.B. Davies and A.A. Graves eds., 1986), *Two Thousand Seasons* is less negatively reviewed and all these critics perceive the work as worth critical attention. These critics refute the arguments of Lindfors and Achebe.

11. Why Isanusi, who is portrayed as an embodiment of both evil and humane traditional African seer and healer in Mofolo's *Chaka*, appears in *Two Thousand Seasons* as a fountainhead of pre-Euro-Arab Africa's cultural treasures and native wisdom, probably derives from Armah's multi-dimensional de-mythification programme which does not entail only historical and cultural re-writing but also includes Eurocentric interpretation of African literary texts.

12. Christopher Caudwell's analysis of the decay and the degeneration of the oral aesthetics of communal ethos into supernaturally-flavoured legends which celebrate 'god-like kings' who tyrannized weak communities into flatterers in his *Illusion and reality* (1973:41-42) illuminates Armah's thesis in this novel.

13. The name, Kamuzu, echoes the name of the contemporary African leader, Hastings Kamuzu Banda of modern Malawi.

14. *Afa (Ifa)* divination is the interpretation of icons from Afa 'carved wooden divination tray used in the art of mystical interpretation'. The signs are drawn on the carved wooden tray by the *Afa* diviner, known as *Boko* in Ewe, after throwing cowries stringed together. The positions of the cowries, determined from

how they have fallen on the wooden tray - head or tail - are drawn on the tray covered with a white powder-like substance.

15. The deity who is the centre of the *Afa* oracle is *Legba,* who is seen on almost every village threshold in certain parts of West Africa. Henry Louis Gates's 'The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey' in Gates's (ed.) *Black Literature and Literary Theory* (1984:287) describes *Legba* as the '... guardian of the crossroads, master of style and the stylus, phallic god of generation and fecundity, master of the mystical barrier that separates the divine from the profane world'. Gates further adds that 'In Yoruba [Dahomean/Ewe] mythology, Esu [Legba] always limps, because his legs are of different lengths: one is anchored in the realm of the gods, the other rests in the human world'.

16. Arhin's footnote explains that 'This law goes back to the first Asantehene, Osei Tutu, 1712 (Reindorf, 1895:51). "Nominal" in the sense that since 1904 it has been a criminal offence to "own a slave"' (Arhin, 1983:20).

17. The *ahey* is a local alcoholic brew which the men have taken to like the duck to water during the 'fertile time'.

18. Since the novel intimates that a year consists of two 'seasons', 'one moist and one dry', (p.17), 'two thousand seasons' means one thousand years.

Chapter 6

The Akan Iconic Forest of Symbols: Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Healers*

> To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.
>
> Walter Benjamin. 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. In *Illuminations* (1985:255)

The purpose of this critical investigation is to unravel how Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Healers* denigrates Africa's Golden Age and the image of the African traditional ruling elite. To transform his vision of how the indigenous ruling elite, aided by European colonizers, betrayed Africa, and permanently fouled her history, Armah synthesizes a complex narrative reassemblement of stylistic repertoires for his novel. The novel's intricate style defies a simple generic classification. The style of *The Healers* is similar to what Alastair Fowler's *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to Theory of Genres and Modes* labels a 'generic mixture'. Fowler defines the 'generic mixture' as 'the outright hybrid, where

two or more complete repertoires are present in such proportions that no one of them dominates' (1982:183). Although the novel incorporates elements of African orature and the epic genre and is shrouded in a thick Akan iconic forest of symbols, these oral features are not only ingeniously hidden from the uninitiated and those uninformed about the Akan world order, but they are also blended with a host of other narrative modes which further veil the folk narrative features and make the work very difficult to enter. The text's self-conscious disruption of its narrative flow projects a radical alienating mode which is a departure from the European novelistic tradition. However, this intricate narrative and the inventive invocation of Africa's oral meta-griots, locate the novel within the African oral tale-form and vehemently reaffirm the novel's self-conscious break from the European tale-form. It is crucial to note that, though the invocation of the African masters of eloquence intimates that the novel's narrative voice will approximate that of Africa's traditional bards, the narratorial focalization which moulds it is that of 'the healers', who represent the pristine metaphysical healing culture of traditional Africa.

The novel's reflexive subtitle, '*an historical novel*', shows clearly that the text is calling attention to its historicity. The historical backdrop of the text, unlike that of Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*, is overtly silent on dates (dates have been cited by the text), and the creative ploys manipulated by Ouologuem's work in order to sustain its historicity are virtually absent in *The Healers*. In spite of this deliberate attempt to veer away from the self-conscious historical mode, important historical events and figures of the period such as Asantehene Kofi Karikari, Queen-Mother Efua Kobri, Asamoa Nkwanta, Sir General Garnet Wolseley,

Captain Glover and others crowd the canvas of the work, thus validating its historicity.

The Healers also exploits the development of Densu's childhood. The childhood crises of Densu operate as the structuring catalyst for the novel. This projects the work as a *Bildungsroman*. But like the other generic components, the *bildung* is not allowed to become the dominant narrative factor and, therefore, constitutes only a strand of the stylistic tapestry of the novel. This narrative maze is compounded by yet another genre: the picaresque. Densu, the protagonist, operates either as a picaro without the usual Spanish roguish propensity or as what Scholes and Kellogg describe as 'the eye-witness narrator' who acts 'as a realistic filter for events' (1966:250-251). Evelyn Cobley's stimulating article, 'Narrating the Facts of War: New Journalism in Herr's *Dispatches* and Documentary Realism in First World War Novels' discusses the narrative technique in which the narrator installs 'the [witness] speaker in the dual role of narrator (interpreting events after the facts) and character (living events as they happen)'. Thus 'the narrator situates himself peripherally to his story, presenting the war experience through the eyes of those around him' (1986:101). Cobley's insight lays bare Armah's manipulation of the characters as eye-witness narrators and as characters, scalded and permanently scarred by the events they witness. This simple stylistic technique turns Densu into an important facet of the focalization, shaping the novel's puritanical point of view which is projected through the perspective of 'the healers' who are headed by Damfo.

The *histor* emerges as another generic adaptation employed by the text. Though the *histor* is defined as neither 'a

character in the narrative' nor 'exactly the author himself', but rather 'a persona, a projection of the author's empirical virtues' (Scholes and Kellogg, 1966:274), the way 'the healers' inform and mould the novel's overall point of view coincides with what Scholes and Kellogg define as 'a projection of the author's 'empirical virtues' - the *histor*'s point of view.

This leads us to the next narrative type which is evoked by *The Healers*: the didactic mode. The novel's didactic impulse, it will be argued, is concerned with the premise that the destructiveness and divisiveness which strangle Africa are generated by the fact that African rulers are obsessed with absolute political power. This voracity for supreme power, the novel posits, has become a virulent disease which has crippled the "Dark" Continent.

This chapter, like the others of this research, will also analyze how the text manipulates its portrayal of women in the male-dominated traditional African society in its exposure of the destructive and the divisive impulses of the tyrannical kings of Africa. Finally, Armah's reconstruction of the history of the Gold Coast will be subjected to scrutiny. It is contended that the most daring literary innovation in *The Healers* is Armah's creative re-Africanisation of historical interpretation. The text manipulates the Asante myth of origins centred around Okomfo Anokye, the Asante supreme priest, in its re-ordering of Akan history.

It is evident that any analysis of this novel, which does not go into the heart of how Armah excavates historical, mythical and legendary sources and transforms them in the imaginative

and visionary crucible of the Akan world view, would be superficial. The point of departure here is that the fascinating symbols of naming and characterisation, which Armah uses, provide the essential iconic background and hermeneutic key for unlocking meanings buried under the debris of the timeless Akan heritage. In his 'Naming and the Character of African Fiction', D.S. Izevbaye articulates the eclectic dimensions of this technique. He argues that the naming of people who inhabit the fictional terrain in the African novel 'can also throw light on the function of names in the three narrative areas where names are influential - in creating a make-believe world, in characterisation, and in the development of meaning' (1981:162). The full artistry of the author's orchestration of the symbiotic dimension of "fictive" names is revealed when the enigmatic naming of Densu, the protagonist, is later unravelled in detail.

Even the novel's "metaphysics of healing" (T.C. McCaskie, 1986:333) - which will be dealt with later - and the name of "Damfo" (Kwame Arhin, 1983), the leader of the healers, appear to be abstractions from Asante ethnohistory. The name Damfo is obviously coined from the Asantehene's palace functionary, 'an *adamfo*'[1] who was 'the head of a palace association' and 'acted as ... a friend for' non-Kumase chiefs who travelled to Kumase for kingship rituals and needed a friendly face to help them in the unfamiliar city (Arhin, 1983:8). Thus it is not surprising that in his present altered puritanical garb, Damfo continues being a friend to those shattered by the villainy of the despotic Akan political order. The full artistry of the author's orchestration of the symbiotic dimension of the "fictive" names becomes revealed when the mystic and the mythical origins of Densu's name are unravelled in detail later in the

chapter. Suffice it to say at this stage that Densu's name invokes the mystical attributes of River Densu, the river deity, venerated in Akan mythology. The river god, Densu, is mythically portrayed as a three-headed-and-six-armed man - a composite divine entity, whose physical attributes connote sublime endowments: omniscience, omnipresence, super-human physical strength and uncanny mental power.

The African bardic narratorial voice's vehement rejection of the European novelistic tradition at the beginning of the tale suggests that the best way to approach the novel is through the African oral traditions. This critique argues, therefore, that Densu is projected not only as a three-dimensional deity but also as the ritual carrier of centuries of the Akan society's historical and moral filth. In his article, 'New Year in the Delta' (1960:256-274), Robin Horton explicates the traditional carrier-motif in which a sacrificial human "lamb" is chosen to travel through the length and the breadth of the community, collecting accumulated moral garbage and willingly carrying this moral burden of the society to a ritual dunghill. The novel's reworking of the carrier motif amounts to a parody and a critique. Densu's supreme act of sacrifice is not tribally conceived and limited only to the Fante kingdom. The ritual deck-cleaning of moral pollutants takes Densu to non-Akan areas like the Ga-Adangbe region, intimating that Densu bears not only the ethnic accumulated moral murk of the Akans but also extends to the whole Gold Coast, and perhaps all Africa. Armah's first novel also exploits the ritual carrier-motif. But the point of departure in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is that the invocation of the carrier-motif conforms strictly with sacrosanct African traditions. Thus, the Man, the anonymous protagonist, who is the ritual carrier of the

nation's moral burden, which is symbolized by Koomson, whom he has to save, jumps into the sea, the ritual dumping medium and purifier, symbolically and spiritually cleansing himself and the nation whose pollution is an ongoing process. As in *The Healers,* the first novel reveals that the Man's act of sacrifice is ineffectual, for the process of moral and physical putrefaction goes on eternally. Unlike *The Beautyful Ones*, however, the point of departure in *The Healers* is that there is no ritual dumping ground for carriers of the moral, social, and historically-fouled burdens. Thus Densu, the brutalized characters (Araba Jesiwa and Asamoa Nkwanta) and the whole village of healers who are butchered at Praso have turned themselves into the ritual sacrificial dunghill of Africa - *'Subin, the Swamp of Death'* (p.235) and *'Donga Luka Tatiyana'* (*Chaka*, p.151) - the stinking forests and *dongas* where slaughtered defenceless war captives, slaves and political opponents of Africa's tyrannical and morally-bankrupt rulers are dumped to rot or to become carrion for predatory animals and birds. To carry a whole continent's burden of centuries of historical and moral pollutants demands supernatural qualities and Densu is, therefore, adequately equipped with mystic and supernatural endowments.

The novel's labyrinthine narrative structure is enigmatized by its structural complexity. Both Robert Fraser's *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah* (1976:85) and Neil Lazarus' 'Techniques in Armah's *The Healers*' (1982:490) describe the work's structure as a 'see-saw' and maintain that its surface simplicity conceals its cohesiveness and unusual complexity. This critique argues that though Densu is not a historical figure, the fact that his name evokes the Akan river god, Densu, makes him a supernatural hero who is more likely to operate at three narrative levels: the mythic, the historical and the

mimetic. At a more hermeneutical level, the text's invocation of the river deity's divine and mythic attributes also projects Densu, the protagonist, as an omnipresent literary searchlight coursing through the rotten entrails of the historical debris of the Gold Coast, searching for curative measures for the diseased country. Though the major concern of the novel is the monomythic hero's quest for answers to how the fragmented pieces of the Gold Coast and Africa in general can be integrated, Densu's rites of passage could also be seen as an agonizing search within the individual psychic self - a search for the self-illumination and metaphysical integration of man and his universe. Thus Densu is a microcosm of the Akan world order and of, in general, the Dark Continent.

The design of *The Healers* is further complicated by its dual plot framework: the Densu/Asamoa Nkwanta (Fante/Asante) plot lines. It is crucial to observe that, in spite of this bifocal plot design, *The Healers* is, fundamentally, a work grounded on an idea-oriented meta-plot. This concept-based structural matrix acts as a deeply embedded plot alchemy, filtering the events of the novel and separating the morally rotten from the pure, and the truth from falsehood. The unifying idea which blends all actions in *The Healers* is the concept of metaphysical healing - a curative ideology propagated by a secret society of the illuminati ('the healers') who believe that the community is mentally and morally sick and needs to be healed. The summary of the plot unveils this prescriptive thrust of the novel.

This novel appears, to borrow from Homi K. Bhabha's article, 'The other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism' (1985), to be shifting the focus of

the contemporary concept which perceives African texts as mere echoes or appendages of the Western literary tradition - from the hegemonic centre to the colonized "otherness" (Bhabha, 1985:149). The re-inscription of the West onto Africa, the authorizing of racist imperialist supremacy and fetishization of racist literary modes of production 'through a profound meditation on the myths of western power and knowledge' will be dialectically and ideologically nullified by the novel's re-interpretation of Asante history.

The great difference between Armah's two fictional histories is their spatial and temporal locations. While *Two Thousand Seasons* encompasses the vastness of the entire African continent before narrowing down to Anoa and is historically situated within an indeterminate prehistoric period which stretches from Africa's cradle of civilization to the initial thrust of the Euro-Arab colonisation, *The Healers* is unambiguously set in the Gold Coast during the period of the British invasions of Asante and the first conquest of Kumase. Asantehene Kofi Karikari (1865-1874) and the Queen-Mother Efua Kobri were the royal personages who bore the first British defeat during this period.

The Healers manipulates the historical disunity of the Akan society, which includes the Fantes and the Asantes, as a microcosmic focus for the rest of Africa. The two communities, which were once members of one Akan entity, are now presented as fragmented into tiny kinglets jostling among themselves for power. The Fante Kingdom, situated along the coastal belt, is weaker and gladly collaborates with the British colonial authority in order to ward off the Asante attempts to make it a vassal state. The Asante Empire, which was situated in the forest belt, and rich in gold, is a

powerful martially-oriented kingdom which dominates the entire Gold Coast.

The tale is initiated by the Fante/Densu plot. The story which begins in the kingdom of the Fantes, is crafted around Densu, an orphan whose mother dies while giving birth to him. His father, who is said to have refused to become a courtier, is dead. Densu has been entrusted to the care of Ababio a courtier whose grandfather was Asantehene's slave-servant. Ababio, whom Densu instinctively hates because he is a manipulator, tries to control the Esuano kingship so that he can ally himself with the British colonial power whose headquarters is located in the colonial capital, Cape Coast. Ababio instals himself king of Esuano after having the heir to the Esuano stool, Prince Appia, killed and the legs of Araba Jesiwa, Appia's mother, broken by his hired assassin, Kwao Buntui. To silence Densu, who refuses to help him, Ababio, frames his ward for the assassination of Prince Appia and tries to have him also killed. Densu is saved by Anan, who is fatally shot by King Ababio's men. Thus, Anan sacrifices his life in order to save Densu, who had also earlier saved him from Kwao Buntui. The latter had tried to kill Anan in a wrestling contest during the ritual games. King Ababio's second attempt to kill Densu, by having him convicted and hanged by a British court, also back-fires. King Ababio is exposed by Araba Jesiwa, who recovers her loss of speech, and Ababio is arrested together with his bogus priest, Esuman, and charged with Appia's murder. Meanwhile, the Fante chiefs are gathered in Cape Coast, trying to find out how they can help their British ally, General Garnet Wolseley, in defeating the Asantes, their traditional enemies.

The Nkwanta plot - the Asante connection - takes further the theme of the rottenness of Africa's traditional ruling elite and their betrayal of the continent. This juxtaposes the ferocious, martially-oriented, legendary Asante kingship with the tamed but morally stinking Fante kingship which is projected by the Densu plot. Like Densu, Asamoa Nkwanta, the Asante General, is subjected to a morally rotten treatment by the Asante Royal House which he has defended faithfully. Asamoa Nkwanta's awakening is triggered by the brutal ritual murder of his favourite nephew during the funeral rituals of Asantehene Kweku Dua I. The slaughter of innocent men, who are supposed to accompany the Asantehene to the world of the dead, is traditionally confined to slaves. As a result of this callous treatment, the traumatized Nkwanta deserts the army, refusing to touch any weapon in defence of the Asante Empire. While Nkwanta is being "healed" by Damfo, the Asante are about to be attacked by the British. Cured, Nkwanta is gradually persuaded to defend his Motherland, and lays out a plan which would have prevented the British from entering Kumase, conquering and burning it down. But the Asante Royal House, led by the Queen-Mother, Efua Kobri, prefers a violated Empire to an inviolate Empire in which General Asamoa Nkwanta's victory would have made him as famous and powerful as the Asantehene. She, therefore, persuades her son, Asantehene Kofi Karikari, to sabotage Nkwanta's military plan. The sabotage is effected by instructing the other commanders to leave Nkwanta's back unprotected and by deserting the palace and leaving Kumase undefended for the British to enter and take over without firing a single shot. This is, of course, Armah's version which is irreconcilable with the recorded accounts by Afrocentric and European historians. In this deconstructed version of Asante history, Armah projects his unique concept of history and attempts to

re-write Akan history and to reject the European hegemonic interpretation of African history.

Walter Benjamin's concept of history and the historian's 'gift of fanning the spark of hope' (1985:255) illuminates not only Armah's notion of Africa's history but also the recurring ray of hope which permeates Armah's novels - a faint hope which is rejected by critics for its alleged lack of historical referent. Armah's obsession with the African legendary tradition which celebrates villains strutting as Messianic heroes is eloquently elucidated by the epigram quoted from Benjamin's *Illuminations* (1985). This view is gilded by Benjamin's insight - 'The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist' (1985:255). In contemporary Africa, as George B. N. Ayittey has iconoclastically shown in his *Africa Betrayed* (1992), Africans who expose 'the truth about Africa and the betrayal of the freedom for which the people of Africa struggled' are treated as Antichrists, '"liquidated", jailed or exiled' (1992:11) by the modern African 'Messiahs'.

The historical construct and the dual plot design of *The Healers*, sketched above, is castigated by Bernth Lindfors, Derek Wright, Rand Bishop and Neil Lazarus. Like the critical reviews on *Two Thousand Seasons*, the most vocal negative criticism comes from the American Africanist guru, Bernth Lindfors, who describes *The Healers* as 'a modern secular version of *The Pilgrim Progress*' (Lindfors, 1980:92), 'cartoon ... comic-strip history' which is a 'good cops-and-robbers, cowboys-and-indian stuff' (Lindfors, 1980:95). Lindfors continues his critical vituperation on *The Healers* by asserting that the novel is 'basically ... juvenile adventure fiction of *The Treasure Island* or *King Solomon's*

Mines ...' type (Lindfors, 1980:95). The only difference between these romances and *The Healers* is, the American Africanist pontificates, that it is thoroughly African juvenile adventure fiction in which the protagonist, 'Densu is the new Jim Hawkins or Alan Quartemain' (1980:93).

Though Derek Wright also discusses the weaknesses of the novel in his work, he treats the text 'with an emotional calm' (James Clifford and George E. Marcus eds., 1986:62) and avoids 'extravagant metaphors and hyperboles' (Clifford et al, 1986:72), which dominate Lindfors' subjective criticism. Wright contends that the novel's historical reconstruction is not realistic by declaring that 'None of these events are located in the orthodox way on *the European calendar*' (1989:245, my emphasis). Wright also rejects the healing concept which, he maintains, 'threatens to become an intellectual vacuum into which almost anything can be put' (1989:254).

Bishop argues that the muted hope which closes the work is nothing but a 'quasi-unity' (1982:536) that runs counter to 'the rigour preached by the healers' and 'the arduous thousand seasons of revolution that lie ahead before Anoa's prophecy will be fulfilled' (1982:536). The Densu and Nkwanta plot-lines are also dismissed by Bishop for being contrived, un-harmonized, and for ending on 'a false note' (1982:536-537).

Neil Lazarus, whose article 'Implications of Technique in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Healers* (1982) and his recent work, *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* (1990), present the most articulate critique of *The Healers*, also argues that 'it is important to note that the idea of the black or any

other race as a "natural community" has no historical referent. The marvellous black time to which the narrator alludes in *The Healers* never existed. It is strictly a mythological construction ...' (1990:233). Lazarus concludes that since Armah has not published any novels since his fifth work and his numerous recent essays '... seem to tread the same paths as *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers* ... one is obliged to consider the possibility that Armah has become "stuck" in his thinking ...' (1990:233). The critical debate generated by the above review will be dealt with during the course of my analysis.

Like *Two Thousand Seasons* and the rest of the primary texts under critical investigation, *The Healers* manipulates the African oral traditions and history in order to expose the rot and the tyranny of Africa's past and how this fouled history accounts for the present disintegration of Africa. The anti-legendary posturing of *Two Thousand Seasons* gives way to a multi-dimensional experimental exploitation of facets of African epic genre and orature in the novel's literary subversion of the Golden Age of Africa and its rulers. The Akan traditional world order which provides the structuring backdrop for the novel evokes a symbolic and mythical density which is so enigmatic and labyrinthine that the uninitiated in Akan ethnohistory, like Joseph Conrad's Marlow in the Congo, are likely to get lost in the thick iconographic forest of Akan symbols.

The novel satisfies the basic requirement of the African epic: the noble ancestry of the protagonist. Densu, the protagonist, is not a commoner. We are told that his mother, Manaan, died giving birth to him and that his father, Kwame Ansa, who is also dead, had refused, just like his son, to be

a courtier when asked to serve the Esuano royal house (p.152). The fact that the proud Prince Appia and his mother, Araba Jesiwa, are Densu's intimate friends, confirms his nobility. Densu's aristocratic background is further authenticated by the fact that the Esuano throne is finally offered to him after King Ababio's arrest for the murder of Prince Appia - an offer he turns down.

Though Armah divests his hero of the legendary tradition centred around bombastic praise singing and hero-worshipping, he has ingeniously added another ancient epic attribute, though in an altered garb - the divine but not tyrannical human frailties of the legendary heroes who kill for martial glory. As already pointed out, Densu's name and his physical and character traits evoke those of the Akan river deity, Densu, who is mythically portrayed as a man with three heads and six arms. Most Ghanaians who know the Densu myth cannot read this novel without wondering whether Armah's hero is not the powerful river deity masquerading as a man. This critical viewpoint seems to be borne out by the novel's preoccupation with rivers. Equally illuminating is Anan and Densu's obsession with the female river, Nsu Ber, whose bottom (the river-bed) the two friends explore with hollowed-out bamboos and in whose 'womb' they hide during their flight from Ababio's gun-men. Paradoxically, the wounded Anan drowns in the same river when he and Densu hide beneath the river, using the same breathing apparatuses, after Anan has been shot by Ababio's gunmen. The novel, then, re-defines the epic hero. It is intimated that a legendary epic hero must be endowed with spiritual purity and mystic powers. But unlike the traditional way of deploying these supernatural qualities subverted into the wanton destruction of human life, the work suggests that these superhuman attributes must be used in

protecting the weak from the eternal brutalization of powerful men and their twisted sycophants. The mysterious origins of Densu's perfection and supernatural physical qualities are decoded by Lindfors but not understood. In his diatribe against the novel, Lindfors criticizes Armah for the 'puritanical' qualities of his protagonist and for projecting Densu, Appia and Anan as 'Adonises' (Lindfors, 1980:92-93). There is a mystical force unifying the three so-called 'Adonises'- a mystical relationship which will be explored during the course of the analysis.

The mystical strength and physical perfection of Densu also evoke another epic element - the attribute of pre-eminence. This epic trait is conveyed at different levels. Densu is portrayed as a young man of mysterious physical beauty, strength, and mental power:

> The slender youth had a sort of unfathomable, permanent calmness in the way he held his body ... He stood completely relaxed as the judge announced the wrestling rules .... It was all one easy, continuous flow, as if the body executing it were a perfect extension of the mind that decided on the action. The look in his youth's eyes was also calm, infinitely calm, a look beyond both humility and arrogance. (p.11)

This sublime physical superiority of the hero is matched with his unnatural strength of mind and body and his bravery. His martial and moral courage are demonstrated when King Ababio's giant assassin, Kwao Buntui, tries to kill Anan during the wrestling match and no one on the field has the courage, strength or intellect to disable the monstrous and demonic killer, the monster with the brain of a chicken (p.17). The chess-like game of wit, *Oware*, which demands concentration and mental skill is won by Densu and so is the long swimming contest that requires stamina. Even his manipulative

guardian, Ababio, who knows him better than anybody else, alludes to the mystical attributes of his character:

> It is known you're capable of many things, some of them amazing indeed. Everybody says you're strange. That means no one is ever sure what else you may be capable of. (p.113)

The epic quality of pre-eminence is now compounded by the mysterious. Densu's enigma is reinforced by his supernatural brain. Ababio testifies to this when he reveals to Densu that Buntui, his hired assassin, is the strongest living being in the world. The evil manipulator unveils his determination to win Densu over to his side. He concedes that only Densu is capable of defeating Buntui because of his supernatural intellectual endowment and courage:

> "Buntui has the strongest body anywhere around ... You, Densu, could beat him in any fight. But that's not because your body is stronger. Your mind is faster ... Thirty thousand times faster than his." (p.114)

Anan's matter-of-fact acceptance of Densu's demolition of Buntui reveals that he does not perceive Densu's display as anything unusual. There is the intimation that the two friends are intuitively aware of each other's inner endowments. In an earlier attempt to persuade Densu to join him in taking over the Esuano stool, Ababio exposes why he is so interested in making Densu an ally in his quest for kingship: Ababio wants a human tool who is 'intelligent' and courageous (p.29). When the evil power-hungry Ababio fails to lure the Densu, he goes for Kwao Buntui whom he calls 'the poor boy' with 'such a small brain'. Ababio, however, declares that 'Sometimes ... defect makes a person a valuable ally'. This qualification is contemptuously dismissed by Densu. What Ababio wants, Densu tells him, is 'a slave ... a zombi' (p.114) - a servile status which Densu rejects by refusing to have anything to do with kingship when Ababio

asks him to make himself available for the Esuano stool. This view is further confirmed at the end of the tale when Ababio and his bogus priest, Esuman, are arrested and charged with the murder of Appia and Densu is again offered the kingship of Esuano (this time by the community) but rejects it for a second time.

The novel's most virulent denigration of traditional Africa and its chiefs is its portrayal of Appia's assassination by Ababio, a descendant of Asantehene's slave-servant. This curious linkage of Ababio to the Asante Royal House immediately alerts the reader's attention to the work's comparison of the overt organised tyranny and moral rot of the kingdom of Asante with the covert despotism and moral stench of the Fante kingdom. Appia's heinous murder is exploited at three levels to effect the novel's purpose of exposing Africa's fouled history, celebrated by patriotic Africans as the Golden Age of Africa. The three facets of tainted heritage that the novel deploys are the African oral arts, the degeneration of pristine cultural values and the murky entrails of Africa's historical follies. The dirge which opens Appia's burial rituals reveals how the text's dense traditional African backdrop is woven:

> It was a slow, red-eyed march. A woman started a song in a fragile voice, a song of farewell. Of the marchers behind the body, few were able to open their mouths to chant the song with her. Most could only hum the melody. The words, carried by the woman's voice alone, rose unsteadily, painfully above the general hum. The dirge was a song of green fruit dying in a season that should have seen only growth; of the fall of young trees in the absence of any storm; of the unnatural cutting of the stream of life. And the chorus chant was of the unavailing search for a reason why. (p.53)

Armah's creative works, then, are informed by two fundamental concerns - to expose the foulness of Africa's past and

present, and to search for the root causes of the moral rot which is responsible for the wanton destruction of life and the eternal disunity of Africa. The exhumed historical origins of the continent's brutal past are to be used in finding a cure for the sick continent. This interpretation is confirmed by the core of the lamentation which posits that the 'dirge' - 'two thousand seasons of slavery and disintegration' - has two fundamental components: firstly, the process of the premature violent destruction and decay of Africa, and secondly, the roots of the rapid physical and moral fragmentation of the continent. This first part of the lamentation - the process of Africa's historical derailment - deals with the centuries of violence and the desolation of the African and his world. The second component of the funeral song, 'the chorus chant', is devoted to finding the answer to why Africa is plagued by eternal tyranny, destruction and disunity. The 'The chorus chant' of the lamentation, which directs its attention to unveiling the underlying causes of Africa's historical derailment and finding new ways to re-route the dark continent back to its natural course of flow of life, is covered in both *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*.

The anti-legendary stance, which provides the dominant mode of the denigration of traditional Africa and its rulers in *Two Thousand Seasons,* gives way to politically-motivated adulteration of the undefiled African rituals by the corrupt kings who are bent upon maximizing their political power by transforming sacred ancient customs into destructive political weapons. This official perversion of indigenous and sacrosanct cultural beliefs is effected by legitimizing the aberrations through a process of magico-religious mystification. The most powerful evidence of this critical

formulation in *The Healers* is the conversion of the ritual games. The novel unmasks the origins of the ritual games as follows:

> The way people who still remembered talked of them, these had been festivals made for keeping a people together. They were not so much celebrations as invocations of wholeness. They were the festivals of a people surviving in spite of unbearable pain. They were reminders that no matter how painful the journey, our people would finish it, survive it and thrive again at the end of it, as long as our people moved together.
>
> That was the spirit of the first rituals. But the hard realities of our scattering and our incessant wandering had long disturbed the oneness these festivals were meant to invoke, to remember, and to celebrate. (pp.4-5)

By highlighting Africa's journey of life and the unshakable conviction that the black world would reach its natural destination as long as its people act as one unified entity, the excerpt not only debunks the cultural and historical dislocation of the Akan society and Africa in general but it also rehearses the journey motif which is initiated in Armah' first novel, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born,* and is given an elaborate fleshing out in *Two Thousand Seasons*.

The theme of the quest for Africa's aboriginal wholeness, which is reaffirmed by the chorus chant of Appia's funeral dirge, takes on the macrocosmic dimension of becoming Africa's mythic and historical quest. Densu becomes the symbolic searchlight which is designed to find the answers to the genesis of Africa's physical and moral infirmity. This explains the text's transmutation of Densu into a divine figure who witnesses almost all the great rotten events of the novel and is subjected to all the agonizing tortures which are inflicted by Africa's evil rulers:

> The game had a kind of power over Densu. From infancy he had watched them every chosen year, and known his time

> would also come to take part in them. The games fascinated him. Yet in spite of his fascination, something about them disturbed him... What were these games for? (p.5)

The text's treatment of Densu, Appia, Anan, Araba Jesiwa, Asamoa Nkwanta (the Asante General), and Damfo, as carrier-motifs of Africa's centuries of moral pollution and suffering is brilliantly analyzed in Richard Priebe's 'Escaping the Nightmare of History'. Priebe contends that Densu's and the other main characters' restlessness and search for wholesome relatedness with their world and for answers to their metaphysical malaise are similar to '*agon*, unrelieved sufferings' (1973:58) which constitute an epical quest. Densu is the central microcosmic version of the larger Akan community - the persona whose sufferings and dreams become those of the Gold Coast and Africa. The following perception of Densu evokes the dominant concern not only of *The Healers* but also of Armah's other novels - the subversion and replacement of the larger communal unity by fragmented tribal kingdoms, directed by the selfish individual interests of the chiefs and their families:

> A whole community gathered every chosen year to take part in rituals of wholeness. But at the end of the ceremonies of wholeness a single individual was held to be glorified by the whole community ... The truth Densu saw was a sharp image: a single winner riding over a multitude of losers. Unwilling to accept the meaning of the harsh image, Densu searched his mind for reasons to soften the truth he had seen ... The only reason he found in the nature of the games was something monstrous, a perversion that repelled him naturally, powerfully. (pp.6-7)

The narrator traces this 'perversion' of the ritual games to the Esuano royal families. The text's anti-legend stance re-enacts that of *Two Thousand Seasons*. The work's rejection of the isolation of 'a single individual' for glorification

instead of the whole community amounts to a subtle castigation of hereditary rule which selects one person for regeneration and deification. The direct satirical hammer blows, which are deployed by *Two Thousand Seasons*, find a new depth in *The Healers* in which they give way to a rather oblique satire. What is being envisioned is the fact that Africa's tyrannical and corrupt kings have prostituted its heritage by converting its pristine values into political weapons. Thus, the ritual games created for invoking the communal wholeness of the *Abibiman* become an instrument for determining either who is to rule or who is to be assassinated. This perception is confirmed by the conversation between Densu and Ababio when the latter implores Densu to win the game so that all power could be his. Earlier Ababio reveals that 'There are those who have the power to make kings and unmake them' (pp.36-37). Densu's realization that the ritual games are an instrument for selecting kings for Esuano triggers his question: "Do you mean the games have something to do with the holding of power at Esuano?". And Ababio replies: "More than you think ... Far more than you think ... All you have to do is to be yourself, Densu, and win. I envy you" (p.38).

The oral historicity of the ritual games, which the text manipulates, is authenticated by Arhin's article which lists the sterling heroic attributes of the Asantehene. These glory-evoking praise epithets which were used in hero-worshipping the Asantehene all emanated from the first Asantehene, Osei Tutu. The praise names - 'the king as a nimble wrestler ... "the invincible wrestler Akwa"'[2]; 'the king's physical strength'; the king as 'great marksman with strength in his arms ... an intrepid fighter'; the fearlessness and fearsomeness of the king - constitute the

elements of 'the *Apee* poems' (praise songs) which portray the Asantehene as 'the model warrior'. The repertoire of the oral praise poems which venerate the Asantehene - the poems of 'oral recitations of *obadin,* appellations, beaten on the *atumpan*[3] drums or sung by the minstrels, *kwadwom,* or by the chorus of the Asantehene's *kete* band' (Arhin, 1980:26) - appear to form another facet of the embedded oral medium which structures this novel. But instead of the traditional atmosphere of glorification, the narratorial voice stamps the tale with mock-heroic ridicule, loaded with ironic inversions. The list of the activities which make up the Fante ritual games which open the novel - wrestling, gun marksmanship, swimming and playing the royal game of wit, *oware* - endorses this critical view.

The pervasive moral rot which engulfs the political life of Esuano is conveyed to us through the cultural prostitution of Africa's ruling elites. In the kingdom of the Fante, the novel intimates, all state crimes are cloaked by mystifying and legitimatising them in newly-fabricated customs, adulterating pristine cultural values or refurbishing exhumed unpopular rituals for political domination. For example, following his murder of Prince Appia Ababio's debasement of libation, which is a sacred ritual, in his attempt to conceal his crime not only highlights the impotence of the kings and their bogus priests, but also exposes how chiefs transformed flawless customs into despotic instruments for attaining supreme power - a political strategy aped by the contemporary political leaders of Africa. Ababio, the master-mind behind the prince's savage murder, calls for 'kola' and chews it 'till his eyes and lips were an angry red' (p.54). Then he begins to desecrate the ancient ritual of libation in order to cloak his crime in vacuously pious ritual:

Fathers, here is drink for you.
Drink, and listen to a survivor's sorrow.
Receive our prince
And welcome him, fathers,
And soothe him in his pain.

Such a bitter death he died
A death against nature,
Death before his time.
Drink, fathers,
And listen to our sorrow.

A death like this calls vengeance.
See my eyes, fathers,
Note their redness.
See my tears, fathers,
And taste their bitterness.
...

I, Ababio, promise you fathers.
I promise days without food,
I shall spend nights without rest,
My eyes will be tortured with sleeplessness
Till the killer lies beneath my hand
And Appia's soul can stop
The painful wandering of the murdered
And find peace with your spirits.
Drink, fathers,
And remember this promise of a sorrowing survivor.
(pp.55-56)

This lyrical narrative is ingeniously structured to include details of Ababio's future actions and is also pregnant with situational irony and sardonic humour. The evil Ababio intones with a forked tongue how he will spend sleepless nights planning how to have Densu killed for the murder of Appia and the 'vengeance' he calls for, we know, is directed at Densu for refusing to be manipulated. But the reader also knows that Ababio becomes, ironically, the target of the vengeance he has unleashed on his own head through his invocation of Akan ancestral gods and spirits. It is interesting to observe that, in order to veil his heinous

crime, Ababio has to commit other violent crimes: the fatal shooting of Anan, and the attempted murder of Densu.

Although the mourners are impressed by Ababio's posturing, one character sees through his veil of satanic deception. The tired Ababio, we are told, revives himself by drinking the remnants of 'the drink of ancestors' - an act of ritual sacrilege - and is about to continue his defilement of the sacred ritual of incantation when 'a voice, gentle yet firm, stopped him' (p.56). It is the voice of Nana Esi Amanyiwa, Appia's grandmother, whose reaction to Ababio's hypocrisy suggests that though she does not directly accuse him of the murder, she knows that he is the culprit. The meaninglessness of life is conveyed by the fact that Appia is killed at the end of an initiation ceremony, which is intended to be a stage in his rites of passage - a stage which should usher him into manhood. Prince Appia, 'the green fruit', is cut down by Ababio, the descendant of Asantehene's slave-servant, during the transition from boyhood to manhood. Since the symbolic attainment of manhood means copulation with a woman, marriage and fathering children, the Prince is murdered during the period of liminality from the status of boy to that of man. Nana Esi Amanyiwa puts in Appia's grave, which is self-consciously dug in his mother's bedroom, ritual substances, objects and sacred figurines, loaded with ritual iconography:

> Esi Amanyiwa had brought the most precious of her possessions with her. She had brought a fertility doll, something from her own departed days of womanhood and fruitfulness. She had brought also two silver rings, a bangle made of red, unmixed gold, and two long chains of the same metal at the end of which hung one locket of a ram and another a dove. Esi Amanyiwa placed the ornaments of gold and silver in a small urn, also shaped of gold. Then she gave the urn, together with the image of fertility and returned journeys, to the diggers in the grave to place beside the princes' body. (p.57)

It needs an ethnographer who is versed in Akan iconic symbols to decode this enigmatic narrative, dense with ritual meanings. The reference to 'returned journeys' suggests the cycles of rebirths and deaths Appia is fated to go through. The notion of life and death perceived as an endless cycle is powerfully conveyed in *Fragments*, Armah's second novel. In that work Naana, the blind visionary grandmother of Baaku, the protagonist, suggests that the birth of a new born baby constitutes a journey from the spiritual world into the world of the living. Death, therefore, is a return to the world of the spirit from which we had travelled when we were born. Death, according to Naana, is *'the end' and 'the beginning'* (*Fragments*, p. 201). In the above-quoted passage from *The Healers*, the fertility doll may be seen as an attempt to help the Prince, who has not yet sired any child, to do so in the world of spirits. In other words, the initiation ceremony that is terminated *in medias res* by Ababio is ritually reactivated by the grandmother. The ornaments of gold and silver are ritual sacra which Prince Appia's visionary grandmother believes will ensure his re-entry into the world of the spirits without loss of his noble status, as well as his rebirth into the world of the living, without alienating his royal attributes. Gold is a symbol of kingship in Akan cosmology and the symbolic value of gold accounts for the use of gold dust in sealing the wounds in Appia's mutilated body before burial. This view is confirmed by Kwame Arhin's 'Rank and Class among the Asante and Fante in the Nineteenth Century' which defines 'the accumulated hoard of gold ... as *fotoo*, "a treasure bag"' whose 'contents consists of a great variety of gold dust and ornaments, for the owner, his conjugal family and his retainers, cast in the forms of the artifacts and objects of the Akan social and physical universe' (Arhin, 1983:9).

The inordinate desire of the ruling elite to camouflage their evil destruction of life and their voracity for self-deification is exposed when, Ababio, the murderer of Appia, tries again to mask his rotten role in the assassination by jumping into the grave and insisting on being buried with 'his beloved Prince'. These hypocritical antics had successfully fooled the traditionally gullible people of Esuano, but like the visionary characters of the novel - Anan, Prince Appia, Araba Jesiwa, Ajoa, Damfo, Ama Nkroma and Densu - Nana Esi Amanyiwa can see through Ababio's hollowness. Hence, for the second time, the sharp-witted grandmother deflates his ego, as he desperately tries to carve for himself a glorious image of humaneness and sensitivity and to proclaim this to the mourners:

> Then Nana Esi Amanyiwa's voice was heard.
> "Let him go with him ... since that is his wish."
> Esi Amanyiwa had spoken calmly. She had not raised her voice. But the effect of her words was instant. Where before the room had been filled with the noise of Ababio's loud lamentation, now there was the profoundest silence, a silence like the sound of forests on a starless night.
>
> Ababio stopped weeping.
> ... Ababio could not find his voice, so he spoke no words. The look in his eyes was eloquent enough. It begged the grave-diggers to raise him up into the world above. They helped him up. (p.58)

The self-referential narratorial commentary reveals how Ababio's attempts to fool Appia's grandmother about his innocence but fails abysmally. The preoccupation of the novel is unmasked by Nana Esi Amanyiwa's sustained denigration of the power-hungry Ababio, who is prepared to commit murder in order to achieve his ambition to grovel before the Europeans, the new barometers of political power that was once controlled by indigenous kings. The sardonic tone of the narrator tells us that Ababio's humiliation is so devastating

that the simulated *kola*-induced redness of his eyes instantly undergoes a metamorphosis. The reader is told that 'the redness of his eyes subtly changed, from the sad redness of a mourner's eyes to the angry redness of the eyes of a resentful, mortally humiliated man' (p.58). The novel again uses the ritual pouring of libation, this time by the spokesman of the Confederation of the Fante Council, Nsaako, whom the visionary woman healer, Ama Nkroma, describes as a man with 'a wise head and a good heart' - 'a healer pretending to be a spokesman' (p.218):

> Nananom,
> Now the Oyoko enemy,
> the Asante thousands, the prickly porcupine quills
> for whom war is love
> have risen against your children
> again.
>
> This time
> you have sent us help,
> the help of the white strangers
> from beyond the seas
> from beyond the horizon.
> Nananom.
> Help them help us drive the Asante thousands back
> and keep them in their own lands
> so we can have peace.
>
> Nananom,
> ...
> the creator of beings,
> the unbending tree of life,
> the beginning of all things,
> the end of all things. (pp.210-211)

This invocation of divine help from the world of the spirits is perceived as authentic and not sacrilegious because it is endorsed by Ama Nkroma's reverent opinion of Nsaako. But the idea of the ancestral gods bringing Europeans across the seas to help the Africans is both ironical and sardonically humorous. There appears to be a concealed sneer evoked by the banal blank verse. It seems this is a creative ploy designed

to expose the naivete and the hollowness of the utterance and, by projection, the blindness of the Fante chiefs. The message being driven home is that the legendary kingship tradition, which employed military conquest and tyranny to incorporate diverse tribes who are reduced to second class citizens, dominated by a 'supreme ferocious legendary tribe', is dialectically and politically unsound. The unwholesomeness of this nation-building strategy is that it forces the weak to ally themselves with aliens in order to protect their right to rule themselves, making it possible for alien invaders to take over the African continent. The Sotho and Tswana alliance with the Boers against King Mzilikazi and its subtle condemnation by Plaatje in *Mhudi* is thus replayed in *The Healers*. The wasteful Asante wars against the weak tribes of the Gold Coast and the sale of war captives into slavery is repudiated, but the victims are also ridiculed for their naivete and blindness: how can the alien invaders who have their own selfish motives generated by hegemonism be regarded as help sent by ancestral spirits and the gods of Africa?

The corruption of traditional religion as exposed by the desecration of the sacred ritual of libation is extended to cover what the narrator sees as the most corrupt feature of Akan history and religious practices: human sacrifice. The self-subversive digression which opens the novel invokes the sacred rivers of Akan cosmology as follows: 'Have you told the listener that of the sacred rivers of our land, the closest to Esuano was the Pra?' (p.3). The paradoxical juxtaposition of the destinies of the Fante and the Asantes is enigmatized by the revelation that the Pra is a physical boundary separating the Fante kingdom from the Asante Empire but it is also a spiritual symbol which unifies the two Akan traditional enemies because both revere the Pra as a deity

and offer sacrifices to it. Densu, the symbol of *agon*, watches with horror as defenceless slaves are sacrificed to the Pra by the antagonistic kingdoms of Fante and Asante, all performing ritual human sacrifices to the same river deity and invoking its mystic powers against each other! Manipulating Densu as the centre of focalization, the narrator makes it clear why he rejects this fouled history as the purported Golden Age of the Asantes. The human sacrifice practised by impotent chiefs and their bogus priests reveals another decayed aspect of the Asante Empire.

The king of Assen Nyankomase, Nana Tsibu, the Fante monarch, who is likened to 'a pampered baby' (p.205), offers human sacrifices to the Pra in order to halt the advancing Asante hordes. The sacrificial victims are slaves -war captives. The victims' throats are slashed and their bodies weighted with stones before they are thrown into the river. The callous attitude to human life generated by martially-oriented kingship rituals, is also evident among the Fante communities living near the Asante Empire and separated from the Fantes by the sacred river, Pra. The gruesome details of this senseless slaughter of slaves, which is disguised as sacrifice to gods by the kings and their priests, presents kingship as the main cause of slavery and a barometer of how ancient religious rituals have become rotten:

> After each prayer the refrain was beaten:
>
> Accept, O Bosom Pra
> Accept this offering, sacred river,
> Accept, accept.
>
> A new victim was pushed to the edge of the water with each such prayer. At the words "Accept, accept", strong men cast him down forcibly and a sword slashed his throat. His blood poured out to redden the river. His weighted body was flung into the water where, dragged down by its heavy stone, it disappeared from sight. (p.161)

By comparison, what the initiates in *Two Thousand Seasons* consider as a horrifying death in the slimy belly of the European slave ship appears to be a more humane death than the death their own chiefs in *The Healers* mete out to those they have turned into slaves. The bottomless hell of savagery, which is institutionalized by the kings of the Asante Empire, is yet to come. On Densu's arrival at the outskirts of Kumase, he is made to 'retch' (p.235) by the foul stench flowing from 'Subin, the Swamp of the Dead', the forest where bodies of slaves sacrificed to impotent gods and murdered rebels are left to decompose. The stench serves as the most contemptuous indictment of hereditary rule in Africa. The zenith of the politics of villainy and the destruction of African kingship in Armah's novels seems to have been reached when the Asante Empire was about to fall. The novel's historical consciousness reverses the Asante heritage and deglorifies the pride of the Asante nation. Many patriotic Asante readers will find it difficult to accept the novel's disfigurement of their heroic and glorious past, though Armah's version of that history is irrefutable.

Intent upon exposing the level of brutality in the kingdom of Asante, the narrator makes Densu witness a second incident of human sacrifice - an Asante human sacrifice from the opposite bank of the Pra, which happens to be his side since he is now in Praso which is within the Asante Empire. The text's juxtaposition of the Fante and Asante human sacrifices to the same river, triggers interesting connotations. Both kindred Akan kingdoms continue to tyrannize the ruled, and both are addicted to the supernatural, through magico-religious mysticism. While the Asante warriors are retrieving some of their drowned warriors who unsuccessfully tried to cross the river earlier on, the headless body of a woman, one of the

people sacrificed by King (Nana) Tsibu of the Assens (Fante), is brought to the surface with the dead Asante warriors from the bottom of the Pra. Thus, the hollow 'sacred' ritual sacrifices of the two opposing Akan communities negate each other. To counteract the Assen sacrifice to the Pra, the Asante promptly begin to perform their own human sacrifice:

> With them [Asante] came small, strong groups of warriors driving before them other human beings, men and women, not warriors but people bound ready for sacrifice. There were twenty men and ten women thus bound and led to the river. Of the women two looked like mere children ... but as he looked at the priest and warriors with their victims, the conviction possessed him that there on the bank were faces he could recognize. They were faces from a past that was still fresh as a wound. He saw Appia, he saw Anan, he saw Jesiwa the destroyed mother, and his body moved towards them, its speed entirely its own. (p.167)

The ambiguous and cryptic portrayal of Densu's reaction to the slaughter which is about to take place in the name of divine sacrifice triggers a wave of insights which are hard to unravel. We are told that Densu 'did not decide anything' and his running to save the sacrificial victims 'was not any conscious decision'. There is a nagging intimation that Densu is propelled into action by a mystic power he has no control of. This enigma will be dealt with in detail later (see pp. 333-336). What is crucial here, however, is the fact that the text perceives the human sacrifices as a degeneration of the sacred origins of Asante - the sterling myth of origins sanctified by Okomfo (Priest) Anokye. The dream of Asantehene Osei TuTu and Okomfo Anokye, the supreme founding architects of the Asante Empire, the novel contends, has become a nightmare. The root cause of this political and religious dislocation, we are told, is the fact that the legendary tradition was a magico-spiritual subterfuge that was designed to achieve political union without recourse to bloody

warfare. Thus, all customs and laws are deliberately said to have been created by Okomfo Anokye. The original pawns in this political game of mystical chicanery were the chiefs of the six divisional states who joined the Kumase king (Kumasihene) to form the Asante Union. To carry on the deceit, all Asantehenes regard Okomfo Anokye's original magico-mythical ritualized structures and laws as the sacrosanct authority upon which their power is based. The Asantehenes also believe that the magic of Asante invincibility will continue eternally as long as the Okomfo Anokye's magical rituals remain unsullied. But in order to maintain the magic spell, the Asante kings desecrate the sacred rituals. The senseless killing of sacrificial victims is a part of this ongoing perverted attempt to maintain Okomfo Anokye's original magic spell. The obesity of the priests unveils the true object of their spiritual vocation. Densu's audacious physical assault on the priests and his attempt to save the sacrificial victims is conveyed as follows:

> One of the executioners, a huge one so fat his breast came down in folds like a woman's, raised a short barbed arrow skyward. He asked the blessings of his god on the weapon in his hand and on the job he was going to use it for. His prayer said, he beckoned to his companions and they pushed forward three victims, the slaves destined for sacrifice.
> The executioner with full breasts drew back his right arm, ready to skewer the first victim's cheek with the little arrow that would stop his tongue from cursing his killers at the moment of death. He almost reached his aim, but at that point of impact something hit him in his left side with a force not even his fat frame could resist. (p.168)

Densu's attack on the bogus priests, who conceal their own impotence and ineffectualness through religious mystification, amounts not only to his rejection of these fiendish rituals but also unveils his religious conviction

that God should not be feared but loved. The attack on the priests also evokes Densu's attitude to Africa's addiction to the supernatural and how this is manipulated by the despotic kings. The corpulence of the Asante Royal priests suggests not only the fact that the sacredness of their vocation is removed from the celestial realm and is now confined to the belly - the worship of materialism and gluttony - it is also the index of their moral putrefaction. *The Healers* directs its didactic onslaught against Africa's prostitution of its heritage, particularly its ritual and religious practices which have been subverted in order to glorify the single legendary heroes - the kings. Like the Saifs in Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*, the Akan kings have discovered the political advantage of legitimizing their crimes by cloaking them in ancient rituals which are ideologically remodelled for maximizing their tyranny and their enslavement of their people. That Densu makes a desperate effort to prevent the deaths of the sacrificial victims and the fact that the surviving victim gives the ineffectual Messianic hero a look of pity - an intimation that his attempt at redemption comes too late - suggests that the butchery of the defenceless by the kings and their priests will continue and that the collapse of the Asante Empire is inevitable.

The novel's exploitation of the spiritual and moral bankruptcy of the priests and the nobility as a physical index of the crumbling of the Asante Empire is ingeniously rehearsed during the dying moments of the legendary Asante Empire whose martial ferocity is enshrined in its ancient heroic aphorism: "Asante, wokum apem a apem baba" ("If you kill a thousand Asante warriors, a thousand more will replace the dead"). The text adopts a repetitive narrative mode to reinforce the shallowness of the absurd attempts to halt the

impending dissolution of the decayed empire and to frighten off the advancing British army of invasion. The grovelling priests give the orders for countless human sacrifices be to made and insist that only "the youngest" and "the healthiest", "the strongest" and "the best" be sacrificed to the impotent gods:

> "Do not kill only the weak, do not kill only the sick and the children!" the priests exclaimed. "The spirits deserve the youngest, the healthiest, the strongest sacrifices. Do not deny them the best offerings!"
>
> The bodies of the victims were mutilated, not to please the spirits who only wanted their blood, the priests explained, but to frighten the advancing white soldiers into turning back, away from Kumase. The bodies were placed along the road, at every junction, at every great turning, to stop the white invaders.
>
> *Still the white army pressed on towards Kumase.* (p.282)

That the unifying ancient magic which worked so well for Okomfo Anokye is both ineffectual and hideously corrupted is revealed by the fact that the endless human offerings made to the Akan gods, and the countless efforts made to halt the advancing British soldiers by frightening them with fiendishly mutilated human bodies, have achieved only the reverse. The futility of the endless cycle of attempts to thwart the British advance into Kumase is conveyed by a refrain which seals each futile endeavour: '*But still the white army pushed on towards Kumase*' (p.282).

Another facet of the multifarious disfigurement of traditional Africa and its ruling elite in *The Healers* is the narrator's castigation of the adulteration of Akan society's communication systems by the kings and the notables bent upon amplifying their own despotic power. The role of the village crier - the primeval African public mass media system - unveils the web of the novel's assimilation of African oral

traditions. The transformation of this traditional communal device of communication into a private medium for gagging opponents and shaping public opinion is exposed by Ababio's Machiavellian indoctrination of the town crier during Densu's 'poison-bark trial' after the murder of Prince Appia. The narrative shifts into its favourite mode of highlighting the hidden inner manifestations through the index of externalized physical attributes. The moral corruption of the village crier is unmasked as follows:

> The town crier was a hunchback. He was dressed in the tunic of a warrior, and his small, dense body was covered with white, brown, and red talismans and amulets. The crier's voice was high. It came through his nose, but its sound had an odd, tingling clarity, so that even when he spoke fast it was easy to understand everything he said. Whenever he came to an open space where people had gathered for any purpose, he stopped and chanted his message to the living:
>
> Leave your food to the flies
> Let the sun drink your water
> Remember the prince who died
> The strong one who died green
> The green one who died without fruit.
> A man has died before his time
> Another will die tonight.
> The trial will end in death
> Outside the palace gates tonight
> Leave your food to flies
> Let the sun drink your water. (p.118)

While the physical repulsiveness of the crier's deformity alerts the reader to his spiritual and moral handicap, the banality of his lyrically-structured message unmasks its devious intentions. The message rehearses, rather subtly, images of Ababio's bogus libation, thus exposing the diabolical 'tongueless slave', Ababio, as the real author of the message. The physical deformity of the crier and his hunter's clothing project the intended textual insight. His small, compact body is decked in *juju talismans and amulets* -

a portraiture which evokes all the nuances of a physical and cabalistic killer. But the coda of the crier's message is debunked by its carefully-structured dialectical narrative: to brainwash the dim-witted people of Esuano into accepting the excavated ancient political instrument of 'poison-bark trial'. The fact that the accused always dies when given the poison-bark shows that the trial is nothing but a ritual murder created by kings for the permanent elimination of their opponents. In a community inherently addicted to magico-religious rituals and the supernatural, this is the safest way of exterminating political adversaries - the most perfect method of committing political murder.

Ababio's ingenious manipulation of the crier in order to shape public opinion amounts to the novel's most eloquent demystification of how the so-called pristine customs and religious rituals of Africa were created. To highlight this traditional political stratagem, the text intensifies the physical aberration of the crier by describing him in the most nauseating terms. We are told that 'one single vessel in his forehead seemed about to burst free of the skin' and that he looks like 'a frog with something heavy pressing on its neck' (p.119). The novel's intense focusing on the crier who is nothing but Ababio's sycophant intimates that his inferior role conceals his diabolical ability to pollute, rapidly and effectively, the mind of the community through a systematic ideological brainwashing. The narrator, it seems, intends to prise open the historically-fouled bowels of the legendary kingdoms of Asante and Fante, and then to enter into a dialogue with the reader. The reader is invited to decide whether what he sees suggests that any of these kingdoms have ever experienced a Golden Age.

Like the Saifs in *Bound to Violence*, Ababio exhumes the disused ritual political weapon of secret murders designed by ancient god-like kings to enable them to commit political murders under the very eye of the people whose seduction by the supernatural is so great that they cannot see through the ploy. The novel intimates that any unpopular measure can be implemented as long as it is cloaked in the supernatural garb. What is unveiled before our eyes is how the codification of rituals which enshrined African customs was effected. The first and the second rules are nothing but careful abstractions of Densu's and Appia's positions in the ritual games. To put it another way, Ababio's instructions to the crier are designed to project Densu publicly though the traditional public communication system of 'crier's crying' as the murderer of Appia and also to ensure that he is the first to drink the poison-bark. Both Armah's novelistic histories, *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers* contend that the rituals, customs, legends and myths of modern Africa had and are still being adulterated by the ruling elite. The ideological purpose behind Ababio's dialectical formulation of the rules is exposed by Anan, who investigates the mechanism of this ancient rite of royal ritual murder:

> "Someone is suspected of a crime. They make him drink this poison. He dies. That proves he's guilty ... All those who know it say the first person to drink the poison always dies. Now they say you'll be the first to drink it on Saturday ... He's also talked about a drug put into food to make people admit crimes ... It sounds like something that simply weakens you. Makes you agree to whatever you're told. Don't eat what they bring you here. I'II make sure you get food with no funny drugs in it". (pp.116-117)

Anan's explanation to Densu of the process of the poison-bark trial debunks Ababio's careful indoctrination of the Esuano people.

'Like the tainted village crier, the royal priest, Esuman, is fiercely loyal to Ababio, who eclipses the influence of the king of Esuano, Nana Kanto, throughout the novel. The name of the king of Esuano is revealed to us only towards the end of the novel after his death (p.298), making Ababio, the villainous grandson of the Asantehene's 'famous' slave-servant, the central royal figure of the Fante plot. Esuman is presented as the double of Damfo, the chief healer, who was his master and whose wife, Ama, this failed novice-healer turned royal priest, seduces and takes with him to Esuano when he swaps the relative obscurity of the healing vocation for the glitter of royal service. This action converts the Damfo-Ama-Esuman threesome into a kind of iconic symbolic trinity - a ritualistic patterning which permeates *The Healers*. The text exploits its favourite narrative device - making the ostentatious external features reveal Esuman's hidden character traits. We are told:

> Esuman was not dressed in the simple style of healers. He wore a flowing silken robe. Its many colours crowded busily against each other in the leaping light of the fire under the boiling liquid. Esuman moved slowly. He moved like a man who had at last realized a long elusive dream of his soul .... (p.120)

The anti-legend mode which permeates Armah's two novelistic histories is evoked here in rather mellow tones. The narrator self-consciously magnifies Esuman's seduction through his royal flamboyance, alluding to the fact that Esuman prefers the 'flowing silken robe' to wearing the healer's simple outfit. The desire to emulate royalty, the novel suggests, accounts for Esuman's conversion from the healer to royal priest, which echoes Ababio's vainglory and his inordinate ambition to be king. Self-indulgence and megalomania are the driving forces behind the atrocities of both men. With a forked tongue Esuman tells the crowd which has come to watch

Densu die that 'poison-bark' is 'the drink of truth' which 'would kill the guilty but leave the innocent untouched'. Esuman, the phoney evil priest, continues his mystification of the people of Esuano as follows:

> It was deadly to murderers, but to the clean of heart it was harmless as water ... "He will walk away a living man tonight if he is innocent of the prince's murder. If he is guilty, he will die the painful death of murderers. His body shall be thrown unburied far from the paths of men. Animals will shun the poisoned corpse. The vultures themselves will stay away from it." (pp.121-122).

At this juncture, it is important to point out the main difference between Asante kingship rituals and those of the Fante. The Asante notables kill Asamoa Mkwanta's nephew openly, displaying the bombastic empty arrogance of their legendary tradition which treats the Asantehene as a Demi-God who has the power to do anything. But in the Fante kingdom the murder of Appia and the attempted murder of Densu are all covert acts. The royal rot is openly flaunted in Kumase as symbolized by 'Subin, the Swamp of Death', while it is veiled among the Fantes. What we have here is a re-enactment of one of Africa's most ancient traditions - ritualization, which is the source of the codification of customs in traditional Africa. The narrator appears to be engaged here in a kind of dialectical dialogue. The reader is being given instruction on how African traditions are created and the text seems to be screaming at the reader to take note. We recall how Ababio prostitutes the sacred ritual of libation in order to conceal his murder of Appia and now we are witnesses to how a grovelling priest, masquerading as a healer, exhumes from the Akans' murky historical past a death-dealing political weapon for killing rebels and calls it *'the drink of truth'*. There is not a single objection from any member of the community and Anan tells Densu that the people are confused and do not

care any longer about the state of affairs in their community - a timid resignation which marks the general apathy induced by the politics of eternal villainy.

This violation of traditional values is not the only facet of the novel's method of denigrating the image of the traditional ruling elite and Africa's Golden Age. The naked politically-motivated destruction of man and his world is another theme which is exploited by the text in its subversion of traditional Africa and its kings. *The Healers* opens with the brutal murder of Appia by Ababio's assassin, Kwao Buntui, the half-wit with extraordinary strength. The savagery of the killing is revealed by the fiendish way in which Appia is first butchered by Buntui and then later meticulously disfigured by Ababio:

> The prince Appia's eyes had been gouged out with some extremely sharp instrument. Two bizarre, nameless threads hung down from the sockets, invisible because more of the same motionless flies covered them completely. But that the eyeballs had been removed was clear. A line of blood had run straight down the right cheek from the right eye-socket. The neck had been cut in a deep gash across its right side. The cut left the head tilted sharply leftward, the ear touching the shoulder. In the wide open wound on the neck another accumulation of bluebottle flies, filthier than those caught in the eye-sockets and just as hopelessly drunk with blood, had gathered.
>
> The corpse's mouth was encrusted with clotted blood. It seemed blood from the butchered throat had first spurted outwards through the mouth before finding its way down the newly hacked opening. There was a second thicker line of blood. It was dry now, and strangely fibrous to look at. It ended under the left side of the corpse's chin, the last trickle of it trapped between the cheek and the tongue, which hung outside the mouth, limp, swollen, grotesquely elongated. (p.52)

The narrative which depicts Appia's murder is fastidiously loaded with gruesome and gory details which draw the reader's

attention to this self-consciously crafted narrative. Its impulse is the typical narrative mode of defamiliarization of epic horror. The repulsive details are meant to brand in the reader's mind the vileness and the ruthlessness of man as a political beast - a demonic ogre which brutalizes and sadistically slaughters anyone who stands in its way. The horrific details highlight the abyss of the political culture of villainy, supported by a slave mentality. The savagery which is projected by the narrative not only pushes this satanic murder from the realm of humans to the realm of predatory beasts but it is also meant to jolt us from our conventional responses to the unlimited dimensions of the evil of despotism and absolute power. The text draws our attention to the fact that Buntui, the brainless monster, is both an innocent victim and instrument of this despicable crime. *The Healers* intimates that unrestrained power, whether it is political or physical, can become uncontrollable, unleashing a holocaust of destruction. The savage and sadistic murder of Appia projects a miniaturized version of Africa's own centuries of brutality and bloodshed. The narrator's invocation of the ancient griots as he appeals to the masters of eloquence to aid him, confirms the view that Appia's death is perceived as the ongoing process of Africa's destruction and disintegration. This interpretation appears to be endorsed by Eldred D. Jones in his editorial article 'Myth and Modernity: African Writers and their Roots':

> Ayi Kwei Armah in *The Healers*, has used the technique of the traditional story-teller as his overall structural device and the flow of the narrative is punctuated at significant points with invocations. The effect is to emphasise the extreme brutality and savagery of the murder ....
>
> (Jones, 1992:3)

Jones' comment echoes my own reading of the epical horror-oriented passage quoted above. The excerpt, cited from *The*

Healers, also underpins the imbecile depravity which prevents the dim-witted Buntui from realizing the moral enormity of his criminal act. The narrative unveils the evil greed which goads Ababio into perpetrating such destruction of human lives. We are told that Ababio has a 'rotund, satisfied body' and his eyes 'hinted at something obscene'. The text presents Ababio's inordinate greed for power and materialism in terms of his copious food consumption. His hunger for power and material things is akin to that of an ogre whose hunger for food is so voracious that no amount of eating will ever satiate it. The narrative voice points out that Ababio's 'eyes suggested someone already stuffed to bursting after having consumed everything within his reach, but so uncontrollably greedy that in spite of satiation he was still anxiously searching for more things to consume' (p.13). Ababio's devilish personality and guile are disclosed by the fact that he is able to go to the scene of this heinous murder and to fastidiously carve portions from the corpse in order to frame Densu as a *juju*-oriented murderer who kills in order to use human organs for doctoring to enable him to inherit the awesome physical attributes of the dead Prince. This critical view is also a ploy that hints, rather subtly, at the mystical bond between the two characters. This brutal murder is an eloquent confirmation of the novel's preoccupation with the inherent bestiality of Africa's warrior-kingship.

Like *Two Thousand Seasons*, *The Healers* does not exonerate the European invaders from intensifying the process of decay and disintegration, initiated by the indigenous rulers of Africa. The novel engages in a dialectical annihilation of the European claim to superiority in order to debunk the British role in the derailment of Akan traditional rites of passage

and the general malaise which debilitates the African continent. The text targets the destructive European role in Africa by adopting two distinct approaches to the de-mythification of Eurocentric hegemonical claims. *Two Thousand Seasons* concentrates on demolishing the Euro-Arab religious bigotry and the related historical and cultural superiority. *The Healers* spurns such European literary traditions as are perceived to have shaped and informed African writing. This ideological and Afrocentric literary posturing of *The Healers* reveals two viewpoints. The first is the view that the novel is solidly anchored in the African oral matrix; the second is that an African writer must repudiate any critical view which projects the work as a mere imitation of European literary canons. The structuring of the novel is achieved by the text's invocation of the African oral arts, the self-conscious digression which subverts the narrative flow of the tale. *The Healers* presents the determined effort to traditionalize the novel and to move it from the hegemonic influence of the European narrative tradition as follows:

> But now this tongue of the story-teller, descendant of masters in the arts of eloquence, this tongue flies too fast for the listener. It flies faster than the story-telling mind itself. Pride in its own telling skill has made it light, more than merely light. Pride has made this tongue giddy with joy. So the story-teller now forgets this rule of masters in the arts of eloquence: the tongue alone, unrestrained, unconnected to the remembering mind, can carry only a staggering, spastic, drooling idiot tale. In such a story, told by an unconnected tongue, *the middle hurls itself at the astonished ear before the beginning has even had time to be mentioned. The end itself is battered into pieces. The fragments are smashed against the surprised listener's ear, without connections, without meaning, without sense.*
>
> *Let the error raise its own correction.* The speeding tongue forgets connections. Let the deliberate mind restore them. Proud tongue, child of the Anona masters

> of eloquence, before you leap so fast to speak, listen first to mind's remembrance. (p.2, my emphasis)

But it is critical to point out a paradox: by moving away from the Western traditional novelistic mode, Armah unconsciously moves into the postmodernist realm of metafiction! This self-conscious alienating mode generates various implications. It engages the parodist metafictional mode and at the same time locates the tale within the African oral traditions. On another level, this self-subversive narrative pattern, which does violence to the novel's birth, introduces a radical and an anti-European tale-form. In short, *The Healers* is engaged in a literary act of self-interrogation in which European aesthetics is rejected and replaced by a revised African tale-form. This reflexive narrative mode is aimed at dismantling the proprietorship of the written word by the Western world. The didactic mode evoked by the text constitutes what Abdul R. Janmohamed's 'Humanism and Minority Literature: Toward a Definition of Counter-hegemonic Discourse' defines as 'a viable counter-hegemonic discourse' (1984:297) which deflates the intellectual presumptuousness of aliens who arrogate to themselves the right to discriminate 'the "usable" from the "unusable" past' (1984:284) of other races. African aesthetics, which rejects the lineal time sequence and an ordered space into which human existence can be moulded, is being engaged here. The novel is manipulating the postcolonial technique Bill Ashcroft et al call 'appropriation ... the process by which the language is taken and made to "bear the burden" of one's own cultural experience ....' (1989:38-39). The novel's self-conscious anti-European posture is authenticated by a veiled sneer hurled at the classical definition of the monomythic epic

hero. Commenting on this reflexive authorial intrusion in *The Healers* in his 'Time in the African Novel' (1982), Izevbaye says that the 'digression is itself a narrative ploy meant to achieve the illusion of orality' (1982:74).

But this is not all. 'By violating the form', to borrow from Victor Shklovsky's seminal essay, 'Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: Stylistic Commentary', Armah 'forces us to attend to it' (1965:30). The self-conscious narration is designed to evoke the multiplicity of meanings and the mythic complexity of the novel. This viewpoint is confirmed by John Bensko's stimulating article entitled 'Reflexive Narration in Contemporary American Poetry.' Bensko puts the point as follows (1986:84; 89):

> Because the reflexive narration breaks up the experience and reflects the perspectives of subject and subject-as-artifice on each other, it expands the poetic space of the narrational surface. The *fabula-sjuzhet* division becomes much more than a structural device for critics; it is the embodiment of the complex, diverging, and yet inseparable elements of the determinism of natural events, the human will, and the imagination ....
>
> In a realistic narrative, the burden is on the narrator to order the discourse properly and avoid ambiguities which undermine the authority of the discourse as an accurate representation of reality. When the narrator fails in these tasks, we ... begin to look more closely at the nature of the mediation, asking questions about the reasons for the failures ...

The questions triggered by this textual self-interrogation are designed to lead the reader to the deeper insights in the novel. The novel manipulates various narrative devices to reinforce its attempt at multi-layered meanings. Thus in an elucidatory parody, Ajoa asks Densu to prove his love for her by being an epitome of the archetypical hero of romance: "The lover must go to the land of the dead and fight *three*

monsters. If he survives and comes back he must give the tails of the *three* monsters to the beloved" (pp.153-154). Besides ridiculing the traditional notion of heroism, this parodist device also resonates the iconic symbol of Densu's identity as a ritual carrier-motif as well as the hero's mythic/divine three-dimensional entity as the Akan river deity (River Densu), which is eclectically exploited by this novel.

This authorial digression also asserts the work's historical mode and its coming into being as a literate discourse contrary to its declared oral authenticity. It appears the novel is deliberately calling attention to its Africanised form and structure, particularly its dual plot framework, and its impregnable Akan traditional world order. Lindfors, Wright, Bishop and Lazarus contend that Armah has failed to unify the Fante and the Asante plot-lines into a coherent whole and that the Asamoa Nkwanta plot-line 'ends on a false note'. The self-conscious disruption of the flow of the narration is, it seems, a literary and hermeneutic clue for decoding the rather fragmentary ending of the novel. This view is borne out by the fact that the novel's self-alienating opening refers us to the bardic story-teller's need to avoid structuring a tale whose 'middle hurls itself at the astonished ear before the beginning has even had time to be mentioned.' That the story begins *in medias res*, contrary to the injunction cited above, suggests that the work's 'sense of ending', to parody the title of Frank Kermode's *The Sense of An Ending* (1966), anticipates the fragmentary end of the novel, which subverts the conventionally structured plot. There is enough textual evidence to suggest that the untidy ending of *The Healers* is not a flaw but rather a deliberate creative ploy. The self-

textual-subversion which initiates the tale overtly subverts the ending of African traditional tales, prescribed by the sacrosanct oral traditions. Although the self-alienating opening, self-consciously admonishes against leaving the tale's ending in fragmented pieces, there is a nagging intimation that the text is
intentionally drawing attention to the fact that the narrative might not be entirely reconcilable with the European tale-form or that it might run counter to the sacrosanct African oral traditions.

The genius of this digressive narrative interpolation is revealed in the fact that the notion of the 'single unified action' or 'unity of plot action' (Aristotle, 1965:41-42) - "the artistic wholeness of action" - which is projected by the text is nothing but a marvellous parody of Aristotle's classical definition of plot. In his *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, M.H. Abrams presents the concept of unified plot structure as follows:

> The order of a unified plot, Aristotle pointed out, is a continuous sequence of beginning, middle, and end. The *beginning* initiates the main action in a way which makes us look forward to something more; the *middle* presumes what has gone before and requires something to follow; and the *end* follows from what has gone before but requires nothing more; we are satisfied that the plot is complete. The beginning (the "initiating action," or "point of attack") need not be the initial stage of action that is brought to climax in the narrative or play. The epic, for example, plunges *in res medias* ....
> (Abrams, 1985:140-141)

It must be pointed out that the sacrosanct tradition of single-plot structure and unity of action defined above and parodied by the bardic narrator is not an African oral bardic dictum, but that of the Western literary tradition. This interpretation is confirmed by Sam Ukala in his article,

'Plot & Conflict in African Folktales'. Ukala's extensive research on the plot structures of African folktales reveals that although the majority of traditional African stories are single-plot tales, some are double-plot- and multiple-plot-structured (1992:62-72). Ukala proves this view by citing examples of African tales like 'The Little Boy and his Guinea Fowl', which has seven plots. The Nigerian critic then links his thesis to Aristotle's definition of plot, saying:

> The Twins in [F. Abayomi's] *Fourteen Hundred Cowries* [1967] is an example of a multiple-plot folktale. It has four "well-constructed plots", which, in Aristotle's words 'must have a beginning, a middle and an end' as well as 'a certain length ... which can be easily embraced by the memory".
>
> (Ukala, 1992:65)

Clearly, Ukala's thesis confirms my interpretation. Armah's parodying of the Western literary theoretical prescription unveils his anti-imperialist and European-hegemonic position as well as his irreverence towards the authoritative European literary traditions which historically influence African literature. The author is engaged, self-consciously and ideologically, in what amounts to exorcizing the European literary values from *The Healers*. The reflexive disruption of the narrative flow of the tale, therefore, becomes Armah's sublime act of revolt against alien literary modes of production and overt demystification of his didactic intentions. This ideological and dialectical posturing is brilliantly effected by Armah by putting the sacrosanct literary prescriptions of the pillar of Western literary theory, Aristotle, into the mouths of Africa's ancient griots and then smashing them. The impulse which directs this anti-Western-literary stance is revealed by Armah's comment in the essay, 'Masks and Marx ...' He says:

> The fashion of naming ideas after individuals is inherently immature, but if we cannot grow beyond individualist labels, we can at least be accurate about their use ... A better way would be to treat ideas as ideas, not [as] private property. That way we would not make the mistake of assigning whole streams of ideas to one eponymous ego.
>
> (Armah, 1984:36)

This explains his subversion of the Aristotlean concept of plot. It also suggests that sacrosanct traditions, assigned as private property to single individuals, both foreign and indigenous, enshrining individualistic and elitist myths at the expense of the communal ethos/ideal, will be dismantled. It is pertinent to note that although the novel does not depart from the epic impulse of "plunging *in res medias*" (Abrams, 1985:141), it overtly ignores Aristotle's pronouncement on literary production modes of drama and fiction - a creative dogma ingeniously put into the mouths of Africa's bardic narrators! The informing radical anti-imperialist ideology of *The Healers* and *Two Thousand Seasons* - a multi-dimensional anti-Western-hegemonic posture - is articulated by Armah himself as follows:

> It makes no difference to the Western racist mind if Western artists imitate African forms and techniques. Because what makes Western art civilized and modern is that it originates in the West; what makes African art primitive is that it originates in Africa.
>
> (Armah, 1984:41)

The didactic purpose of the novel is Janus-faced: to dismantle the false glory of pre-colonial African legendary rulers and to smash the European proprietorship over universal knowledge and civilization, particularly the view that the West is the keeper of the magic key to the realm of the arts and the sciences. In his 'Shifting the Bases: The Present Practice of African Criticism', D.S. Izevbaye confirms this view as follows:

> Armah proposes a reversal of racial and cultural values attached to signs, symbols, and images in colonial and postcolonial societies. His method permits no grey zones between the poles of black and white, good and evil, for his intention is to identify those colonized areas of African culture so that they can be weeded out and replaced by other values.
>
> (Izevbaye, 1990:132).

The Healers, it must be remembered, continues the great iconoclastic rebellion against the African oral arts and Western hegemonical literary and cultural traditions, initiated by *Two Thousand Seasons*. The key to this fragmentary ending of the work is the self-referential sentence '*Let the error raise its own correction*' (p.2). It seems, the novel's fragmented and non-harmonized twin plots - the Fante plot versus the Asante plot - reinforces, in a powerful and innovative way, the theme of Africa's chronic disunity which is the novel's central concern. To have a tidy ending to a tale of divided self and nation would be unrealistic. This view is lucidly conveyed by David Lodge in his *Working with Structuralism: Essays and Reviews on Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Literature*. Lodge asserts that 'Even ending a story at all - ending in the sense of tying up all the loose ends of plot, setting the destinies of all the characters - even this comes to seem like a falsification of reality' (1986:150). In his 'Time in the African Novel', D.S. Izevbaye also endorses the above view when he declares that 'Armah's narrator suggests life is untidy and art is orderly.' Izevbaye, then, concludes: 'History and reality have no order of their own apart from what is assigned to them by the human mind' (1982:75). The realism and harmony created by art, is, therefore, only an illusion of reality.

The narrative reflexivity which shapes this text can be traced to the other novels of Armah. A close analysis of the beginnings and the endings of Armah's five novels will confirm that all five novels begin and end *in medias res*. This view cannot be dealt with here because it falls outside the province of this research. However, *The Healers* is, self-reflexively, calling attention to its Akan traditionally-based structure and its relationship with the other four novels, turning its back on the European novel tradition.

The difference between the African tale-form and European aesthetics, being evoked by *The Healers,* is sublimely and lyrically conveyed by Kofi Awoonor in his 'Voyager and the Earth':

> The traditional artist is both a technician and a visionary, these roles being indivisible and interdependent. His technical sense enables him to select and utilise materials which in themselves carry a spirituality, an innate essence. It is from here that the transformation into the visionary realm is primarily fed.. Forms and motifs already exist, predetermined in an assimilated time and world construct. He only serves as an instrument for transforming these into an artistic whole, based on his imaginative and cognitive world, and upon a realizable principle of human joy, progress, and, more important, celebration ... In short, his art assays a reassemblement, the establishment of a harmonic order.
>
> (Awoonor, 1973:89-90)

Awoonor's comment on the African traditional artist's role, which Armah faithfully assumes in this novel, debunks the ambiguous role the author plays in crafting his novel. As in *Two Thousand Seasons*, Armah exploits the inherited traditional forms and motifs which have their own predetermined spatial and temporal referents, imposing his creative visionary order over them. Thus the novel becomes like a living organism, generating its own eclectic insights - a process Awoonor calls "the magical projection" (1973:91).

But this transformation of the traditional materials, forms and motifs into artistic wholeness is ideologically subverted by Armah because his aim is not to celebrate traditional Africa as symbolized by its ruling elite, but to repudiate the social and political order created by the god-like kings of Africa.

The traditional approach to literary criticism - an explicative strategy which searches for meaning only in the conventionally-structured works of literature - may not be the best approach to *The Healers*. This viewpoint is endorsed by Norman O. Brown (1966) and Clifford et al (1986). In his illuminating work, *Love's Body*, Brown asserts that 'Meaning is not in things but in between; in the iridescence, the interplay; in the interconnections; at the intersections, at the crossroads' (Brown, 1966:247). The digression, therefore, becomes the hermeneutic key to making the unsatisfactory and meaningless ending of the text meaningful. Though the target of the insight of Clifford et al is the ethnographer, it does appear that the literary critic might find their view elucidative. In their *Writing Culture* Clifford et al assert how the critic must act:

> ... like the magician, the hermeneut, Hermes himself, clarifies the opaque, renders the foreign familiar, and gives meaning to the meaningless. He decodes the message. He interprets.
>
> (Clifford et al, 1986:51).

Closely related to the criticism of the text's double-plot structure is the argument that the Pan-Africanist vision of one unified Africa which ends the novel - an echo of the muted hope predicted by Anoa's prophecy in *Two Thousand Seasons* - is unrealistic. That the same shadowy hope is repeated vicariously in Armah's five novels does suggest that this dream of one Africa, the kind that inspired the founding

members of the Organisation of African Unity, influences the ideological and artistic vision which structures the five works. Kofi Awoonor articulates this vision cogently when he asserts that 'Whatever resolutions there are at the end of stringed picaresque tales are designed to restore the ultimate harmony between men, the anthropomorphic order, representing the communal salvation that will constitute a tangible but inevitable portion of the human life' (Awoonor, 1973:93). This silent hope which is perceived by some critics as unhistorical is echoed even in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the novel considered to be the author's most pessimistic work:

> Someday in the long future a new life would maybe flower in the country, but when it came, it would not choose as its instruments *the same people who made a habit of killing new flowers*. The future goodness may come eventually, but before where were the things in the present which would prepare the way for it?
> (*Beautyful Ones*, pp.159-160)

Anoa's apocalyptic vision of the end of destruction by 'destroyers' and their indigenous collaborators (*Two Thousand Seasons*, p.205) - the dream of genuine emancipation - permeates Armah's five novels in modified form. The image of the premature destruction of '*new flowers*' which is exploited by *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is rehearsed by the dirge which is sung during Prince Appia's funeral in *The Healers*. The cohesiveness of Armah's creative vision which forges Armah's five novels into one organic whole is achieved by the rehearsal, re-interpretation, distillation and the orchestration of the same creative devices and themes. Thus, the first novel's symbol of 'new flowers' which denotes the modern African ruling elite's destructive impulse which accounts for the annihilation of young life (statehood and human existence) before fruition, is repeated by the fifth novel, *The Healers*, as 'the green fruit' (p.53) which is

destroyed prematurely before ripening with age. Consequently, the organised violence and politics of immorality, which constitute the thrust of the first work, find a new depth in *The Healers* - the historical root cause of Africa's political culture of tyranny. The two fictional histories are representatives of this creative repetition of ideas, metaphors, and symbols in altered creative garb - the kind of eclectic creative rehearsal which shapes and informs the cross-cultural fiction of Wilson Harris (George Shaw, 1985:122). The discussion leads to one fundamental conclusion, that in *The Healers* form is content.

The Healers continues its innovative assimilation of the African oral arts by invoking the master griots of Africa:

> Ah Fasseke, words fail the story-teller. Fasseke Belen Tigui, master of masters in the arts of eloquence, lend me strength. Send me eloquence to finish what I have begun ... 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 story-tellers, 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 a small, quick sign that your long, silent suffering was not meant, after all, to be in vain. (pp.51-52)

Armah's invocation of Africa's master griots and the famous African novelist -Magolwane, the Zulu 'poet of the soaring silver voice' (p.3); the Akan poet, Nyankoman Dua (p.2); the Mandingo meta-griot, Fasseke; and Mokopu Mofolo, the Sesotho novelist - amounts to an ingenious oral epic generic transformation. This powerful inventive departure from the Greek epic heroic mode gilds the novel in its African traditional orature. The Afrocentric narrator, self-consciously, turns his back on the European classical tradition in which the bard invokes the Muse to aid him in

the arts of eloquence. Intent upon traditionalising his tale in the African sense, Armah's narrator invokes the African meta-griots and the master of the African written word, Mokopu Mofolo, whose *Chaka* exercises a powerful influence over Armah's two fictional histories. It is crucial to note that the narrative voice in *The Healers* shifts from the third-person narrator to the first-person plural, the protean 'we', linking this novel to *Two Thousand Seasons*, and suggesting that the collective voice of the African oral bards is the guise being assumed at this stage by the author.

The text's de-mythification of European literary canonic traditions is extended to the Eurocentric historical hegemony which threatens the African world order. The bondage to space and time which the novel evokes in its conception is again lucidly and eruditely made by Awoonor: 'He [African oral bard] is not a visionary *per se*, like the European artist projecting into *space and time* structures which were not simply there before' (1973:91). Deploying its chorus-simulated narrative mode, the text selects Captain Glover, the omnipotent British officer who handles the Ga-Adangbe and the Anlo sectors of the colonial war of conquest, as a representative for the deflation of British racial arrogance. It is interesting to observe that Glover left descendants in present day Ghana who bear his name. The novel initiates the divestment of Glover's false self-deification as follows:

> Glover the godlike, Glover the white man descended among the black people to do magical wonders. The white man looked immensely happy, fulfilled this Saturday morning. Why should he not be? Here he was a god, a god among mere men, a beloved father-god among infant-men.
>
> ... Here he was, the man who knew himself a true magician when it came to getting black people to fight other black people for the profit of white people ... Here he was, Glover, he whose word was alone sufficient to inspire thirty thousand black men to rush delirious

> into the open jaws of death. Here he was, Glover the glorious, boastful one, Glover for-every-five-black-men-any-other-white-man-can-raise-I-alone-will-raise-hundreds. Here he was, the great white man. No need for the searcher to tire himself searching. Glover was *visible as the sun* this Saturday. (p.255)

The self-appointed superhuman deity of the black people's destiny, Glover, the megalomaniac, is described as 'the great white father, ... the omnipresent, omniscient god' (p.256). The god-like representation of Glover is evoked by the ritualistic chant-like mode by the narrative. The repetitive patterning signified by 'Here he was, Glover' is designed to demystify how power-hungry potentates hypnotize the masses of Africa's people into enslaving themselves. The chant-like repetitions appear to charge the entire landscape with the spell of Glover's superiority. Glover's superior airs and political guile, the novel intimates, reflect that of the Akan kings and African rulers in general. The ritualistic repetition of the novel's portrayal of Glover's political act of mystification is a replica of Ababio's and the Asante priests' manipulation of rituals to conceal the tyrannical and immoral acts of subversion of the larger interest of the Asante community. In postcolonial theory Glover's antics amount to what Homi K. Bhabha's article 'Signs Taken for Wonders' (1985:125-133) and Ian Baucom's 'Dreams of Home: Colonialism and Postmodernism' define as an act of colonial 'fetishization' - an authorization designed to 're-inscribe in the external space of the colony the cultural space of England.' Baucom cogently articulates this view by declaring that 'The re-inscription of the center's presence, as acts of authority, must play in both directions, to authorize the European and to normalize the "native" (1991:8).

But this is not all. The text exposes Glover's self-indulgence. This is effected when General Sir Garnet Wolseley orders him to suspend his military activities against the Anlo-Ewes and send his men to the Pra because the subjugation of Asante is perceived as economically more profitable than that of the Anlo kingdom. This means that Glover is forced to serve under a superior officer in the war against the Asante, instead of leading an army against the Anlo-Ewes and emerging as a military hero. This reversal triggers a dramatic transmutation of the omniscient god - 'tearing his hair', stalking 'furiously inside his tent, cursing Wolseley, calling him a wild stream of names: a jealous envious, cowardly traitor' (p.263). Just as Glover is spurred on by his own selfish aim of achieving military glory which might earn him a knighthood, so Sir Garnet Wolseley wants to fill the British coffers with Asante gold in order to further engrave his own name in the British Imperial heroes' gallery. The 50 000 ounces of gold imposed upon the Asante as a war indemnity levy after the British victory in 1874 confirms this perception. The demolition of Glover's self-deification is graphically conveyed by the novel as follows:

> Glover continued to dream, but then a fatal week came for him. Between Densu's sixth Saturday with him and the seventh, reality pierced his dreams. Reality converted the sweetness of dreams into unbearable bitterness. The exulting hero crashed from the heights of imagined glory, and fell down a laughable clown. Glover the magnificent, Glover the omniscient, Glover the father of the Hausas, *Glover the redeemer of slaves, Glover I-can-call-forth-a-thousand-black-men-where-any-other-could-scarcely-raise-five,* in that swift week *Glover the white saviour came down from the inflated mindsize of giants and dwindled to the mindsize of a dwarf ... unwanted voices called out to him not songs of praise but mocking epithets.* Glover was no longer the great white man. *He had become,* even in his own eyes, *merely the gross white buffoon.* (p.261, my emphasis)

The text's exploitation of the panegyric is manifest not only in the inverted praise singing but also in the device of stringing together praise epithets which normally inform the African epic tradition. The chorus-like narrative repetitions, already alluded to, which feature prominently here too, are now compounded by mock-praise singing. The text's explosion of Glover's self-created grandeur is a reverberation of Ababio's attempt to enshrine his slave origins in royalty and a harbinger of the deflation of the legendary image of the Asante Empire. What is crucial, however, is that this mock-panegyric narrative mode emerges as the central stylistic matrix of both Fante and Asante rites of passage. Glover's destiny is projected as the mirror image of Akan history: Glover is thwarted by Wolseley, evoking the vision of kith and kin, jostling for power and martial glory. Similarly, the Fantes and the Asantes, all Akans, are colonized by the British because they fight among themselves for power and fail to unite against the European invaders. The text's central deflation of Sir General Garnet Wolseley is mythically evoked on his entry into Kumase, 'the never-violated city' (p.288):

> Throughout the streets of the town, loose crowds flowed slowly, aimlessly about. It was as if they had all come out of their houses to await some extraordinary event. The extraordinary event was the entry of the white invaders into Kumase, the never-violated city. As the sun dipped down in the west the *white general Wolseley came riding -- the cripple -- on an ass* surrounded by his officers and red, sweating soldiers. (p.288, my emphasis)

The European victory over Asante is somehow devalued when the conqueror who deserves heroic glory is contemptuously dismissed by the text as a 'cripple on an ass'. This satirical trope conveys the novel's deflation of Sir Garnet Wolseley's empty military grandeur. The military act is not

aimed at territorial conquest but at the economic plunder of Asante's rich mineral resources, particularly gold. Wolseley's racial arrogance and self-grandeur is further dented when the novel reveals that 'He was not a tall man, but the way he held himself he gave the impression of wishing the world to take him for a giant, straining to scrape the sky itself with his forehead' (p.200). Self-deification, the text intimates, is the general failing of all power-and-glory-hungry megalomaniacs, be they black or white.

The text's multi-dimensional exploitation of African oral techniques and history in its condemnation of the ruling elite of Africa, particularly the Akan kingdoms of Asante and Fante, is now pushed into the iconic realm of Akan mysticism and mythico-magico pseudo-religiosity. This critique argues that the novel manipulates the three-dimensional divine attributes of Densu, the Akan river deity, in transforming its vision of the inherent divisiveness of Africa into fictional realism. This interpretation is confirmed by accumulative intimations and narrative clues which crowd this elusively simple novel.

The first piece of evidence, already referred to (see pages 291-292), is the fact that Densu is portrayed as a mysterious character with supernatural intuition and endowments. Though the evidence of Kwao Buntui, Ababio's half-wit hired assassin, should be considered unreliable because the information is fed to him by his villainous master, there is a latent hint that Ababio's fear of Densu leading a 'charmed life' (p.264) is genuine. Towards the end of the novel, just before Buntui - who at some stage works for both the Fante chiefs and British - is hanged by the British in Kumase, Densu runs into him rather mysteriously in three places,

separated by great distances: in Glover's Ga-Adangbe camp, Cape Coast and on the Cape Coast-Esuano road late at night. In their last encounter in Kumase, Buntui is visibly shocked to realize that Densu is omnipresent: 'I find you everywhere', Buntui said. (p.289). And Densu reminds Buntui that he is also ubiquitous. There is a veiled intimation that the dim-witted Buntui is Densu's double - a metaphysically blind sacrificial lamb, a carrier-motif.

The most puzzling attribute of the novel, however, is its manipulation of the Appia-Densu-Anan trinity. There is no textual evidence of Anan and Appia ever being friends, but we are told of the close intimacy between Araba Jesiwa, Appia's mother, Appia and Densu. Araba Jesiwa opens her inner secrets to Densu about her agony of barren marriage to the Esuano prince, Bedu Addo (p.73) and the trauma of childlessness. The Akan river god, Densu, who is the protagonist's namesake, is mythically portrayed as a three-headed and six-armed man, representing him as omnipresent, omniscient and physically omnipotent. There is an ingeniously veiled intimation that the river god, Densu, is now masquerading as three human entities: Appia, Densu and Anan. Densu and Anan are subconsciously drawn to one another by a mystic attraction beyond their control.

It is Anan who foils Ababio's plan to kill Densu. What is baffling is the fact that the protagonist does not tell Anan about Ababio's threat to destroy Densu if he does not help Ababio to secure the Esuano stool from Appia. But Anan intuitively knows that Ababio intends to kill Densu and he sacrifices his own life to save Densu. The interpretation that Appia, Densu and Anan are human externalizations of the

river deity, Densu, is reinforced by another complex oral technique.

The fact that Appia is buried in the room of his mother, Araba Jesiwa, whose whereabouts are unknown during the funeral, reinforces this critical formulation. Araba Jesiwa's room is traditionally perceived as her womb. But the womb, which symbolizes rebirth, also suggests a tomb, the final resting place, which signifies death. In African cosmology, death is both a beginning and an end. Equally puzzling is the intimation that just as the return to the womb constitutes the acceptance of death, the re-entry into the womb is also a stage in the process of rebirth. Dying is a return to the spiritual world which is the origin of our life. The court proceedings, therefore, constitute both death in the womb/tomb which is also a preparation for a rebirth. At the close of the tale when Densu returns from his quest - the search which also constitutes his carrier-motif ritual collection of centuries of Akan historical, spiritual and moral pollutants - he is arrested and is about to be convicted and hanged through Ababio's manipulation. His refusal to utter a single word in his own defence confirms his ceremonial and moral willingness to be sacrificed or to carry the ritual burden for his world. Densu's quest through the murky womb of historical Ghana is also a preparation for a spiritual rebirth - a rebirth which occurs in the courtroom when Araba Jesiwa, who loses the power of speech following the brutal attack on her by Buntui, arrives just in time to save Densu's life. Thus, Araba Jesiwa, who loses her son, Appia, gives birth to another in the courtroom: her spiritual son, Densu. This spiritually unifies Densu and the slain Appia. At another level Densu's muteness in the courtroom is a re-enactment of the African kings' centuries of wanton

destruction of the powerless tribes and war captive-slaves, reserved for human sacrifice, and whose tongues are pierced with barbed arrows to prevent them from cursing the bogus priests and the impotent kings who resort to the desecration of the sacred rituals in order to conceal their own powerlessness. King Ababio's recently acquired gigantic deaf and mute bodyguard, whom Ababio proudly describes to Densu before his arraignment in court, unveils this enigmatic textual insight. Ababio's declaration - "He hears nothing ... even if he could, he'd never be able to report what he heard. His tongue has been cut out of his head" (p.299) - replays the recurring image of the eternal cycle of African senseless tribal war-casualties, futile self-sacrifice, slave victims of human sacrifice, or victims of politically-oriented murders and assassinations. These include Prince Appia; Anan; Nkwanta's nephew; the old man Opanin Kwamen who is sacrificed by the Asante Royal House to pacify Asamoa Nkwanta for the murder of his favourite nephew by Boache Aso, the Asante Prince (p.98); the ritually mutilated beings like the three fatted eunuchs headed by the chief eunuch, Oson, who attend to the needs of the power-hungry Asante Queen Mother, Efua Kobri; Ababio's tongueless and deaf giant bodyguard; the spiritually and physically maimed like Asamoa Nkwanta and Araba Jesiwa; and the supreme ritual sacrificial lamb, and symbol of carrier-motif, Densu.

This critical formulation of the novel's three-dimensional manipulation of the three-headed and six-armed Akan river deity, Densu, appears to be confirmed by a multiplicity of deeply veiled textual iconic symbolism. The first veiled textual evidence is the novel's persistent deployment of the iconic symbol of the *figure three* and *its variants*. When the ritual games open we are told that the judge counts the young

men and they are *nine (three threes)*. Then in a self-referential narrative the fact that there are nine contestants is self-consciously foregrounded: 'This said, the judge counted the young men one more time. He counted *nine*. *The number disturbed the judge*' (p.10, my emphasis). In a flashback in which Densu initiates his relationship with Ajoa and tries to present her with a guava which Ajoa rejects, the narrator tells us that 'For *three* days Densu kept the unaccepted fruit ....' (p.63, my emphasis). Then when Ajoa runs away from the repulsively corrupt Esuman, her stepfather, to her father, Damfo, without telling anyone, the iconic trinity is again evoked by the text when it is asserted: 'In the morning of the *third* day after her disappearance ... Ajoa came back' (p.64, my emphasis). When Araba Jesiwa is being tormented by the *ogbanje*, the narrator refers to her waking-dream in which she sees '*thirty* thousand exquisite plants, flowers, animals, rocks, and stones [that] flowed past ...' (p.75, my emphasis). The next page re-introduces the mystical *number three* when the reader is told that 'In *three* more months there was a marriage between Araba Jesiwa and Kofi Entsua' (p.76). Equally illuminating is when Densu is ambushed, caught and locked up as the suspect for Appia's murder, the iconic number three and its variants appear three times on one page of the novel (p.117). The deployment of the Akan iconographic symbolism is self-consciously foregrounded by the novel. As if this textual manipulation of Akan iconic world-view is not enough, we are told that '*thirty* guards' are watching Densu's hut-jail and that of this number '*three*' are positioned around the hut. A paragraph later, the reader is told that Densu's trial by poison bark has 'been fixed for the *third* day' (p.117, my emphasis). It is impossible to suggest that the text's rehearsal of the iconic number symbolizing a triumvirate is

accidental, especially when we are told 'The poison-bark had boiled over a slow fire at the palace for *three days* (p.119, my emphasis). This is Densu's most agonizing moment and the image of his three-dimensional identity is again invoked. When Anan sacrifices his life so that Densu may live, Ababio responded by going to Cape Coast and procuring '*thirty guns*' and '*thirty men*' to hunt him down (p.141). The text links the Fante and the Asante plot lines by deploying the iconic patterning of three and its variations. The text's most eloquent orchestration of this enigmatic, iconic narrative structure is the dream the traumatised Asamoa Nkwanta has during his hospitalization at the healers' village in Praso:

> "I see *three men*. They are tall and lean, so tall they tower above the trees behind them. They are solemn in their walk. They walk towards me in such a way I know it's me they're looking for. But when they come close they turn round so I can't recognize their faces ... Then at last they turn their faces towards me. They are smiling. I recognize them all. The one on the right is the old man Kwamen, he who gave himself up to be sacrificed in place of the criminal Boache Aso. In the centre is Okomfo Anoche [Okomfo Anokye] himself, smiling, smiling at me. The *third* person is my nephew." (p.179)

The textual manipulation of the three-faceted entities of Densu, the Akan river deity, is a mythical crucible which forges the novel into a creative organic whole. This is unequivocally authenticated when the mythical and the spiritual soul of the Asante Empire, Okomfo Anokye, is presented as sandwiched between two sacrificial men - the victims of Asante's rotten kingship rituals. The dream anticipates how Densu, the Fante protagonist, operates as the bridge unifying Anan and Appia, who are nothing but sacrificial lambs in the great ancient chain of human sacrifices (physical and mythical) which permeates Akan and Africa's history. There is the weird intimation that just as

Densu plays the role of the carrier-motif, the sacrificial lamb who carries the centuries of political ineptitude and moral corruption of the Fantes, Okomfo Anokye, whose initial sacred and mythical customary laws are perverted and transformed into ideological weapons to prop up tyranny and the wanton destruction of innocent Asantes and weak Akan tribes, himself symbolically becomes a sacrificial lamb, a carrier-motif, who bears the political and moral burdens of the Asante Empire. The Densu myth becomes a powerful creative ploy enigmatizing the whole plot line and structure of the novel. Ababio's surprise at Densu's self-conscious return home to be sacrificed for the murder he had not committed further affirms this view: "But if I live to be *thirty thousand* years old, I'll never understand you. The duiker that fled the trap set for it has returned. Why?" (p.299).

Intent upon pushing this mythical three-dimensional perception of Densu home, the omniscient narrator reveals the waking-dreams of the protagonist during his mind-shattering suffering and mourning for both Appia and Anan - his externalized human attributes. It is disclosed that:

> At night he did not sleep. One after another, bizarre thoughts took turns turning themselves into weird images to haunt him. He saw *a fierce, nameless beast, half serpent and half forest cat. The beast had coiled itself around the body of the prince Appia, still alive, and Densu saw it bare its fangs to destroy Appia.* In half-awake nightmare state he was in, Densu had only seen the body of the prince. But at the moment *when the beast was on the point of sinking its fangs into his neck Densu saw Appia's face. It was his own.* (p.60, my emphasis)

Though this convoluted excerpt is loaded with nuances, two of these are crucial to the purpose of this critique. It appears that the novel's projection of the pervasive evil of kingship has entered a heightened level of African mysticism and religion. The Fante satanic triumvirate, Esuman-Ababio-crier,

is symbolized in Densu's dream as a monstrous nameless ogre which is composed of half snake and half wild cat - an Akan traditional image of the devil. An interesting illustration is the fact that Esuman, the neophyte-healer turned corrupt royal witch-doctor masquerading as a priest, evokes the European traditional satanic image in which a depraved Christian priest becomes the devil's advocate - the servant of the devil, propagating diabolical teachings. Ababio and his two hirelings fit into this construct. The mythical bond which unifies Anan, Densu and Appia is further reinforced by an explicit comment by the omniscient Damfo when he tells Densu, who sees Anan's death as his own and mentally wishes to die, that Anan was "more than" a friend to Densu and that he sacrifices his life in order to save Densu's because Anan's "soul looked in the same direction as" Densu's (p.133).

The two men, Anan and Densu, are projected by *The Healers* as the externalizations of the Akan river deity, Densu's inner psychological attributes just as Malunga and Ndlebe are portrayed by Mofolo's *Chaka* as external manifestations of Chaka. This is reinforced by Anan's and Densu's obsession with the female tributary of the Pra, *Nsu Ber* (female river). Before Anan's death, he and Densu use hollowed-out bamboos as breathing apparatus in exploring the river-bed which is portrayed in beautiful lyrical terms, evoking the delicate femininess of the river. The two friends again use a cool stone from *Nsu Ber* as a pillow for supporting the head of Anan, whose nose is bleeding when Anan is nearly killed by the dim-witted monstrous giant. And finally the two friends hide beneath *Nsu Ber* on the night Anan saves Densu from Abibio's hired killers who are armed with guns. But Anan, who is wounded by Ababio's gunmen, drowns in the river. This

intimates that *Nsu Ber*, the female river, is both the protective womb for the helpless unborn child and at the same time the symbol of death - the grave. The river's role as both the womb and the tomb is a re-enactment as well as a fulfilment of Appia's death and burial in the grave self-consciously dug in his mother's room, symbolizing Appia's return to the womb/tomb to be symbolically reborn in the courtroom as Densu. This interpretation explains Densu's waking-dreams in which Appia's face becomes Densu's face when Appia is being attacked and killed by (the Devil) - the half-serpent-and-forest-cat-monster.

This mystical relationship between Densu and Araba Jesiwa appears to be reaffirmed by Densu's carefully foregrounded reaction to the fact that Araba Jesiwa is alive when she had been presumed killed by 'the beast which butchered her son':

> A fantastic joy animated him. In pure astonishment he leaped forward in spite of himself, unable to suppress a little sharp cry of infant, inarticulate happiness. "Mena Araba Jesiwa! he cried. (p.137)

The self-reflexiveness of the narrative patterning, particularly the use of 'infant' and 'inarticulate happiness', elicits a scene of a child welcoming his mother after a long, painful separation. It is difficult to dismiss this sustained feature of the novel as purely accidental. Its pervasiveness suggests that it is an innovation which the novel exploits in order to achieve one of its major creative concerns.

The death of Anan in 'the womb' of *Nsu Ber* could also be seen as his spiritual unification with Densu - another spiritual rebirth. To die is to return to the womb in order to be reborn. Anan's death in the river is, therefore, a return to the womb/tomb (which he and Densu had returned to physically

in the past when they explored the river-bed (womb/tomb) in order to experience a unified symbolic rebirth. The only difference between the two rebirths is that while Araba Jesiwa is the spiritual mother who gives birth to Densu - a rebirth made possible only by Appia's death and burial - the spiritual mother of the second rebirth is the female river, *Nsu Ber*. This reaffirms the protagonist's mythical identity as the double of Densu, the river deity. There appears to be a creative alchemy which transfigures and transmutes the odd pieces of ritual, myth, legend, *leitmotif*, oral history and multi-dimensional facets of Akan iconography, culture, religion and body politic into a complex work of art. Both Araba Jesiwa and *Nsu Ber* appear to be mystically linked together through the Mother-Earth motif: the womb/tomb analogy. Joseph Campbell describes this ancient motif as 'the hub of the wheel of the earth, the womb of the Universal Mother whose fire is the fire of life' - 'the ubiquitous World Navel'. Campbell articulates the paradox of life by asserting that 'ugliness and beauty, sin and virtue, pleasure and pain, are equally ...' the Universal Mother's or the World Navel's 'production' (1957:43-44). All this evokes the pairs of opposites which inform this novel. The most overt illustration of this cosmic antithesis is the text's manipulation of the female river *Nsu Ber* and the male river, *Nsu Nyin*. The female river is portrayed as 'the paragon of beauty' while the male one is perceived as the most powerful, destructive and turbulent river. Its waters are 'opaque with mud' and carry 'a heavy load of leaves, twigs, and broken branches' while its banks are littered with 'silt, a thick, muddy ooze' (p.3).

Nsu Ber, on the other hand, is idealized as follows:

> Its waters were extraordinarily clear. You could see all the way down to the bed of fine sand sprinkled with

> pebbles of many colours, from light yellows to deep, dark purples ... Along the clear river's right bank the fine yellow sand brought by this stream formed a narrow strand ... it was such a clear thing of beauty, people named it Nsu Ber, the female river. (p.3)

The text self-consciously extends the theme of thesis antithesis of life and death, destruction and re-creation, by showing how the greatly different rivers create an unusually fertile and beautiful patch of land which is sandwiched between the male and female rivers, *Nsu Nyin* and *Nsu Ber:*

> Between the female river and the male, below Esuano, lay a wide strip of land cut off as if deliberately from the surrounding land. No one farmed it, though it was fertile, being river soil. A soft mat of grass covered it. It was entirely green, except that at intervals the green was broken by a flower, watery blue, bright yellow, or pale purple, raised a hand's height above the grass on a slender, quivering stalk. The grass was gentle, extremely gentle. Underneath it the soil was soft but firm, and the whole wide strip of land was innocent of thorns. (pp.3-4)

There is a concealed but insistent vision at work in this novel. A muted regeneration or re-creation appears to be slowly transforming the debris of centuries of destruction wrought by god-like despotic kings of Africa and their inheritors, the contemporary political leaders, into a new world order -a rebirth. Densu's spiritual rebirth, the putting together of the fragmented physical and spiritual beings of Araba Jesiwa and Asamoa Nkwanta confirm this critical perception. It is obvious that the inner textual dynamic of the novel is engaged in an ongoing process of assembling all the splintered pieces of lives wrecked during the course of its coming into being into organic wholes - a view which Awoonor lucidly conveys as follows:

> Shocks, surprises, dislocations into irregularities, basic splinterings, and mercurial transmogrifications are only the inner dynamics of the total process.

> Everything is irreducible because everything is important. The process therefore encloses self-generated ecstasy, ritual abandon, moments of madness, the shattering of the formalities of the so-called perceived reality. (1973:91).

The shattered legs of Araba Jesiwa are reassembled, her muteness negated, and her loss of a son assuaged with the regaining of a spiritual son, Densu. The traumatised Asamoa Nkwanta is also physically and emotionally healed and the loss of his nephew somehow relieved with a spiritual replacement, Densu. The most overt textual actualization of this regeneration is Araba Jesiwa's reassembling of her fragmented pieces: the legs broken in three by the obscene strength of Buntui and her loss of ability to speak are reintegrated into one whole being. Y. S. Boafo conveys this view when he says in his 'The Nature of Healing in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Healers*' that 'Damfo's treatment of Araba Jesiwa's almost irreparably broken bones is a masterpiece of traditional healing. It is a medical moulding of fragments into a single whole, that is what healing is about' (1986:99). But what is important is not Damfo's mastery of healing but the intimation that the human regenerated being of Araba Jesiwa mirrors other facets of reintegration within the Akan world. It mirrors the muted hope ritualized at the close of the novel. Both Ababio and Esuman have paid for their crimes and Densu has the loss of his parents at a tender age symbolically reversed. Araba Jesiwa and Nkwanta have become his spiritual parents. Densu, again, functions here as a mythical bridge enigmatizing another trinity: the Nkwanta-Densu-Jesiwa triumvirate. The novel appears to be manipulating two conflicting discourses. At an overt level, the iconoclastic narrator divests all the Akan legendary heroes, particularly the Asantehenes, of their false glory. But beneath this brazen disfigurement of the traditional

African epic heroism lurks an attempt to exhume, purify and reassemble what are considered as communal myths devoid of tyrannical god-like kings' ideologically-manufactured ritual/mythic pollutants. Thus, like *Two Thousand Seasons*, *The Healers* re-creates a new Akan world order from the debris of its dismantled despotic warrior-kingship rituals. The marvellous seduction generated by the celebratory manifestations of the text tends to convey an illusory romanticized image of traditional African heritage.

But the narrator does not allow the reader to be lured by the regenerative and the recreative potentials of this brutalized and divided world. The slow and painful recovery and the "true" emancipation of *Abibiman*, as Anoa predicts in *Two Thousand Seasons*, will take 'two thousand seasons'. Thus the muted hope which is projected by Ama Nkroma - the Pan-Africanist dream of one unified continent, which closes *The Healers* - is only an echo of the apocalyptic vision symbolized by Anoa's prophecy. This illusion is quickly dispelled when the omniscient narrator takes down, piece by piece, the thick ancient walls of cabalistic spell (e.g. the conjuring of the Golden Stool from the sky), wrought by Okomfo Anokye, and makes it possible for the reader to gaze at the unprecedented horrors which Densu tells us are so abominable that their foulness and diabolical nature are 'fit to wake ancestral corpses from the sleep of ages' (p.160). *The Healers* re-asserts and sustains the rejection of African hereditary rule initiated by *Two Thousand Seasons*.

The foregoing discussions which amount to an oblique repudiation of kingship in Africa are amplified by a defiant and radical dismissal of African royalty. Damfo, the guru of the healers, tells Densu that the healers "see royalty as a

disease affecting the people". "Royal power", we are told, "grows from contempt ... It comes from abuse of human beings and things" (p.94). The most overt castigation of Africa's hereditary rule is conveyed in a dialogue between Damfo and Asamoa Nkwanta, the general of the Asante army, whose nephew's ritual murder by the Asante Royal House shatters him physically, mentally and spiritually. The famous general spiritually reduced into a babbling baby by the slave kingdom of Asante - a heinous maltreatment which exposes the soft and slimy underbelly of the Asante Empire's fouled history. Discussing the ideal world with Damfo, Nkwanta asks:

> "What kind of world would it be then? A world without slaves?"
> "Precisely," said Damfo, calmly. "A world without slaves."
> ...
> "A world without slaves! You might as well wish for a world without kings."
> ...
> "Yes, no slaves, no kings."
> ... "You think impossible thoughts, healer. Our people have always had kings and slaves."
> "Not always," Damfo said. (p. 175)

The creative purpose of the novel's exploitation of the Nkwanta/Asante plot is to show the all-consuming nature of the villainy of kingship. Its culture of violence is so thoroughly corrupt that no human value is worth a mouse-skin. Prince Appia was an heir to the Esuano stool but he was killed by Ababio, who has now imposed himself upon the people of Esuano as king because he stood in the way of the latter's royal aspirations. Asamoa Nkwanta is the soul of the Asante army but that does not prevent Prince Boache Aso from deliberately killing the general's nephew. Damfo reveals the thrust of the novel when he says Asamoa Nkwanta "was treated like a slave" and that this "shattered him" (p.97). The coda

to the text's thesis, which is thus underscored by Damfo, is: "If the worth of a man depended on his deeds and not on his birth, Asamoa Nkwanta would easily have been the most important man in the whole land" (p.98). Damfo reaffirms this chronic disintegrating propensity of kingship as follows: "... to the royals the healing of the black people would be disaster, since kings and chiefs suck their power from the divisions between our people" (p.269).

The theme of kingship as a system of government in which the visionless, parasitic and mediocre govern the visionaries and the productive, initiated in *Two Thousand Seasons,* is elaborated upon in *The Healers*. It is suggested that the worm of moral decay which subverts Africa is linked to kingship and its rotten rituals, particularly its institutionalization of slavery. The thrust of the work is that the chiefs constitute the richest sustenance for the destructive growth of slavery. What emerges from the above conversation between Asamoa Nkwanta and Damfo is how tyrannical and immoral the measures are that are created by the chiefs. It also reveals how rotten, disused, unethical rituals are exhumed by traditional rulers for their own selfish ends. These are ideologically disguised and mystified as pristine ancient customs, designed by the first progenitors (like Okomfo Anokye) of the race for the communal wholeness of *Abibiman* and handed down from generation to generation.

The exchange between the prisoner, Densu, and King Ababio also highlights a crucial issue: who begets the other, the slave or the king? The lecture on the genealogical history of slavery and chieftaincy, brilliantly delivered by the inordinately power-drunk Ababio, goes to the heart of the

matter when he talks about the rise of his slave grandfather to royal favour:

> Every royal family is also a slave family. The two go together. You don't get kings without slaves. You don't get slaves without kings. My family has been a part of this - at first the lower part, the slave part.
>
> ... he [Ababio's grandfather] did not make the mistake of wasting his eloquence in honest talk. He used his tongue profitably, only for flattering the powerful. ... Once, my father told me, this my grandfather lay down in front of the king, in public, and shouted:
>
> '"Spit into my mouth, O King, so a little of your infinite wisdom may pass onto me!"'
> "The king accepted the invitation. He spat. His aim must have been excellent. The spittle fell into my grandfather's mouth, all of it. And my grandfather swallowed it. To his eternal credit and to the immediate profit of his descendants, he didn't retch. The knowledge is in the spirit my grandfather passed down mixed with the blood of our mothers [sic] ... After that heroic swallowing of the king's spittle, it didn't take long before it became impossible for anyone to see the king without first being forced to pass my grandfather's scrutiny." (pp.300-301)[4]

Ababio relates his slave genealogy proudly, and with a superb syllogism proves that the quickest road to power is "blind loyalty to those who already have the greatest power" (p.300), namely the Europeans of Cape Coast. He concludes his illuminating lecture with an illustration of his slave grandfather's rise to power. Ababio's unquestionably genuine pride in his grandfather's repulsive bootlicking behaviour accounts for the healers' conviction that slave mentality is nourished by kingship - a political culture exemplified in contemporary Africa where political leaders, cloaked in bombastic praise names, are hero-worshipped by the fawning masses who treat them as god-like kings. Thus, with pride and defiance, Ababio boasts to Densu about his legendary grandfather as follows:

> Look at me now and tell me. Have I betrayed his dreams? Or have I been a worthy successor to him? Who now ever thinks of calling Ababio a slave? Ababio is royal. Ababio is a king. (p. 301)

Ababio kills the heir to the stool and attempts to kill his ward so as to emulate his grandfather's climb up the political ladder. The satanic greed for power - the beast in man, which sometimes turns whole African tribes into refugees - is thus shown to have its origins in the so-called Golden Age.

As an immediate reward for Ababio's grandfather's 'unrivalled epic heroism', the Asantehene gives him away 'as a gift' to 'a white man' who does not need him and so in turn gives him away 'again as a gift to the then king' of Esuano. In historical Asante, those who performed acts of exemplary heroism were sometimes given large tracts of land populated with people as gifts (Arhin, 1980:25). The reverse happens here. The dehumanized act is perceived as an honour by the fawning slave who is given as a gift to a white man. The central concern of *The Healers*, however, is to parody and to ridicule the legendary martial ferocity of the Asanteman - a heroic tradition which is shown to have degenerated into the pathetic swallowing of the Asantehene's spittle. The narrative technique of mock-epic-heroism, exemplified by this incident, is one of the pervasive stylistic modes which permeates this novel. The offering of self for sacrifice to the gods so that the Asante Empire could win military victories against enemies has become a national ideal through which a commoner can attain noble status. This view is historically confirmed by Kwame Arhin in his 'Asante Military Institutions' as follows:

> An occupant of the Kumawu stool, Tweneboa Kodua, is said to have agreed to have himself sacrificed so that the

> Asante could defeat the Denkyera army. Consequently, his descendants are to this day accorded the privilege of freedom from execution by the sword. The name of Tweneboa Kodua is known to every Asante and he is revered as the archetypical Asante patriot. Of all the *abrempon,* the immediate subordinates of the Asantehene, the Adontehene alone never bows to or, removes his sandals when greeting the Asantehene when he sits in state, because an ancestor of the Adontehene was said to have sacrificed himself for an Asante victory. Even if the stories of Tweneboa Kodua and the Adontehene are legends, they emphasize the value of altruistic suicide, and also the weight attached to bravery to [sic] other Asante.
>
> (Arhin, 1980:25)

This historical sanction of self-sacrifice as a rite of passage through which one could climb the Akan social ladder of success and become famous shows that some of the sweeping formulations which are advanced by critics about this novel being a 'comic-strip history' stem from the fact that the Akan world which 'impinges' upon the author, 'consciously or unconsciously', shaping 'his scale of values', providing 'the elements' which inform the novel - 'what Hume calls 'world-1' - is perhaps unfamiliar to critics like Bernth Lindfors. The world enfolding the reader, 'world-2', and 'world-1' which shapes and informs the author's vision, may be partially irreconcilable under certain conditions. Hume's argument - 'If artist and audience are separated by time, language, religion, culture, or class, the amount of shared reality may be small' (Hume, 1984:9) - invalidates Lindfors' rather negative and emotional criticism of *The Healers*. The text's exploitation of servile mentality which has all the attributes of fictional creation turns out to be solidly grounded in Akan history and ritual world order.

The novel extends its divestment of the hollow glory of traditional rulers by caricaturing the Fante who had had

long-established contact with Europeans since the first slave fort, the Elmina Castle, was built in 1481. But the Asante Empire, effectively, became a British Protectorate only in 1900, giving the Fante kings over four centuries of living under European colonial domination before the Asantes too began to experience alien domination. The aim of the text in juxtaposing the two Akan rival kingdoms is, I think, to expose how the political cultures of the two Akan kingdoms are affected by their two different historical experiences. The text persistently shows the Fante kings as crippled by impotence. The text initiates its denigration of the chiefs by humorously ridiculing them for their sexual impotence which is a symbolic index of the different levels of sterility which plague the Fante kingdom.

Densu introduces Damfo's famous sexual-potency-generated drug he has brought along to Nsaako, the spokesman for the King of Cape Coast, Nana Ata. The literal Fante meaning of the aphrodistic drug, *Bediwona*, reveals its ribald parodist intent. The literal meaning of *Bediwona* is 'you will copulate with your mother'. Lurking beneath the sardonic humour and the profanity, intimated by the name, is a virulent condemnatory undertone which suggests that either the kings are corrupt and thoroughly debauched as a result of excessive fornication or that they are politically powerless and need all kinds of bizarre cabalistic contrivances to keep the facade of their god-like omnipotent and legendary image. This ineffectualness is presented first through their physical attributes.

The novel presents its portrayal of the Fante chiefs gathered to welcome Sir General Garnet Wolseley through Densu's point of view. We are told that 'The loud competition of royal

noises in the field was an echo of dizzying movements surging around the tents, centring on them.' This intimates that the chiefs are jostling for the attention of Sir General Garnet Wolseley like beggars waiting for crumbs from the dinner table of the rich and powerful. This view is eloquently affirmed by the declaration that 'In shape it was a procession much like a python freshly fed' (p.193). The denigration of the Akan royal traditions is intensified as follows:

> The head and tail were slender, but the line spread out monstrously in the middle around a large red umbrella with a gilt carved figure topping it. The sun hitting the golden figure came off in a sharp glare ... he saw below the manic red umbrella a wild crowd bulging at the sides. (pp.193-194)

This cheap golden imitation is a deliberate attempt by the Fante chiefs to ape the display of gold which is a symbol of royalty in Asante. The text suggests that the 'gilt carved figure' is not actually made of solid gold. This presents Fante kingship as second rate compared to Asante kingship in terms of martial ferocity and splendour, aping traditions which have lost their enduring pristine values, leaving only the trashy shell of the solid pre-colonial heritage. The second Fante royal stool is ingeniously made to look more impressive. The royal stool is carved and 'supported by a carved elephant whose feet stood firmly on the oblong base'. In front of the stool is 'the hide of a leopard with the head still attached, the yellow fangs bared fiercely even in death':

> The king's feet, almost lost in a pair of enormous flat leather sandals, their upper thongs encrusted with intricate gilt designs, rested on the leopard skin. In front of the king, to one side of the skin, a young man sat crossed-legged, holding two ceremonial swords slanted across each other. Over the king's right shoulder stood a grey-haired man with a black staff at

> the head of which a parrot with its beak open had been carved. (p.197)

The hollow flamboyance of Fante kingship - the bombastic and futile attempts to recapture the mythical splendour of the ancient magical empires, symbolized by the Sudanic Empires of fabulous gold - is being ridiculed by the text. The novel intimates that just as the Fante kings have failed to restore the spell of the past and just as absurd imitations of the past cannot enhance royal dignity and grandeur, so the Asantehene Kofi Karikari and his notables will discover during the British invasion that no amount of bogus sacrifice of slaves and self-sacrificing nobles will recapture that magic Friday on which the Golden Stool was conjured from heaven by Okomfo Anokye. The myth of supernatural origins is about to be exploded by reality: internal divisions and invading British forces. This is reality which no priest can transcend by invoking the supernatural forces of the ancestral spirits and gods.

The Healers renews its disfigurement of the image of traditional Africa by intimating that the Fante chiefs have turned their sole attention to how to get material benefits from their European allies. This perception accounts for Glover's declaration: "Give a black man gifts ... and his soul belongs to you. He and his people will fight for you" (p.259). The most important gift, as far as the chiefs are concerned, is strong alcohol. Thus, we are told that Glover 'bought drinks to bribe the kings so that they would bring their men to fight for him' (p.259). *The Healers* also exposes the hypocrisy which clothes selfish British interests in humanitarian terms. This de-mythification is quickly effected by 'the huge amount' Wolseley generously offers to pay each king every month. He also offers to give each warrior a free

supply of food - an offer which is communicated to the Fante chiefs by Wolseley's interpreter as follows:

> "The powerful white man will give the huge sum of ten English pounds, ten English pounds, let me say it again, ten English pounds, the white man's real money, the powerful white man will give this money every month to each king who brings a thousand warriors to Dunkwa.
>
> ... In addition there will be rice to the measure of one pint each day, and meat, delicious salted meat to the measure of one pound every four days, for every fighting man.
>
> ... The powerful Sir Garnet Wolseley, to ensure that everything goes well, will send one of his white men from among these you see here, to be with each king. That white man will be an adviser, and he must be obeyed, because his advice will be merely for our own good. Disobedience will be punished." (p.201-202)

The fact that 'The enthusiasm that greeted the previous statement' is replaced by 'a vague confused murmur' not only reveals that the Fante kings are somehow aware of their impotence and of British guile but that they are also cognizant of the fact that four centuries of European colonisation has reduced them to near-slaves whose protests are limited to muted grumbling. The chorus-like repetition of 'ten English pounds' amplifies the cheapness of the Fante kings just as the Fante warrior is cheapened by the offer of a few pints of rice and ounces of nutrition-depleted salted meat. If we consider the ten English pounds in relations to one thousand warriors, it means, in money terms, each warrior is worth about three pence in pound sterling!

The novel reveals the inner rot of the kingdom through the carefully-structured image of Fante royalty and through the textual portraits of the individual kings. The kings are parasites who live on the labours of others in luxury and eternal pleasure. We are told that King Ata of Cape Coast

tries to walk instead of sitting in his palanquin and being carried:

> The royal sandals, being flat and several times wider than the king's feet, made him walk slowly, with great difficulty, raising each knee high under his rich cloth ... So when the carriers brought the palanquin he sank into its softness, a gratified look spreading over his face. The four men lifted the palanquin on their shoulders, each taking one corner with its jutting pole. The horns began the praises of the king, and the drums took them up in turn. The red umbrella was lifted again. (pp.203-204)

The carrying of the king in a palanquin on the shoulders of four men rekindles the symbolic referent of the parasitism of kingship and why the novel rejects it as an alien import. The body politic which turns others into slaves to provide for the eternal comfort of others who claim superiority through birth, the novel intimates, is immoral and generates politically-motivated violence by the ruling elite so that they can continue to enjoy themselves and be hero-worshipped by the fawning and gullible populace. The physical description of the chiefs and the evocation of the image of 'softness' also reveals their parasitic propensities and moral and spiritual degeneration. King Edu of Mankesim, who is referred to as 'the father of kings', is described as 'an aged man, trim and dignified in looks' (pp.204-205). The most illuminating portrayal is that of the king of Denchira, Nana Kwesi Kyei, whose kingdom was once the most powerful before the rise of the Asante and is now conquered and absorbed into the Asante Empire. The novel's presentation of a king without a kingdom to rule - a king whose past glory has been reduced to nothing but the empty crown he wears - projects the hollow status of all the Fante kings, whose political power is usurped by the British, and anticipates the fall of the Asante, who naively feel their "magic" (p.216) will last for ever. King Kwesi Kyei's physical description exposes his

royal decline and the absurdity of his carrying on the empty royal sham of self-deification. He is contemptuously depicted as 'a strange-looking man, who walked unsteadily, like a toddler'. Using Densu as the focalizer, the novel unveils the pathetic figure of the once legendary king of Denchira, which was once the most powerful Akan kingdom before the rise of the Asante empire:

> He had a ludicrous-looking crown, a small shell cone which sat insufficiently on top of his head. It was gilded, but the sunshine only made it seem even more undignified. It was not age that made him so shaky on his feet, however, because he did not look old. Certainly he was nowhere near the spokesman's age. (p.205)

We are told that '... Densu glimpsed the cause of this king's instability: his eyes were red as daylight blood, with the kind of redness lent by hot spirits too freely drunk' (p.205). This suggests that the kings normally bury their impotence in hot spirits, freely supplied by the Europeans who find them pliable in their drunkenness. The portrait of King Tsibu of Assen, who is said to have 'glistening hair and skin of such smoothness it was hard to think of him as a grown man and not a large pampered baby' (p.295), underlines the theme of the image of 'softness' and 'fatness' which permeates Armah's novels, evoking the parasitism of the African ruling elite which originates from the ancient kingship of ultimate laziness. The symbol of 'smoothness' projects the kings as huge maggots which do nothing but eat. The work's treatment of this topic confirms the thesis that this novel is a natural continuation of *Two Thousand Seasons*, which deals with the same subject in great detail. The Fante addiction to aping European culture is also deployed by the text in its denigration of the Fante kingdom. That the king of Dominase is called King Solomon, and the fact that the king of Gomoa also calls himself 'Mr Bentil, Field Marshal',

instead of his traditional name, Opanyin Bentsir, echoes the white-washing of African names which the first novel satirizes. This view is powerfully confirmed by the following sentence - 'Then a confusion of incredible names: Blankson, Moore, Thompson, Robertson, each wearing a strange assortment of white men's clothes' - which is a faithful re-enactment of the scene in Armah's first novel which reveals how 'the forest of white men's names' in the European section of Takoradi is threatened by 'black imitators' (*The Beautyful Ones*, p.126).

The climax of the text's vilification of the image of the Fante kingdom is its depiction of the meeting of the decision-making body of the kingdom, the Council of the Fante Confederation, constituted by Fante chiefs, who used the British presence at the coast to ward off Asante imperial aggression. The text shifts into the mock-heroic mode in order to intensify its repudiation of kingship. The aim of the meeting of the Fante chiefs, *The Healers* contends, is to divide "the spoils of war" - the one hundred and forty-four bottles of hot spirits Wolseley brings to bribe the Fante chiefs, who will do anything to get alcoholic drinks. The mock-heroic battle is initiated by Nana Kwesi Kyei of Denchira, whose attempt to grab the spoils ends in abysmal failure, bringing 'the whole box [of liquor] crashing down on top of himself' (p.206). When Buntui, the giant without brains, finally opens the case of drinks, the narrator tells us that 'the laughter of the royals became first a gasp, then a lively conversation about what kind of drink the bottles might contain'. And this initiates another ritual - the ritual of European education epitomized by the Fante interpreter. Thus, 'the interpreter, with an air of great wisdom, studied the writing on the bottle's white label,

turned the bottle round, searched for further inscriptions, returned to the label, stared at the words again, and shaped his mouth to pronounce the liquor's name' (p.207). But before he could read it out to his audience, the legendary Denchira king, the drunken Kwesi Kyei's expert tongue discovers the right name and shouts with joy : "Gin ... And strong!" Thus the Denchira king lives up to his old legendary image by being the mock-heroic victor!

This 'scene in the cultural writings of English colonialism ... the scenario, played out in the wild and wordless wastes of colonial India, Africa, the Caribbean ...', to borrow from Homi K. Bhabha's 'Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817' (1985:144), evokes the fetishism of British colonial education. But here the text reflexively negates its proclaimed cultural hegemonism with a startling counter-hegemonic discourse cloaked in a double-talking trope. The author of the double-voiced signification is the drunken King of the Denchira, who is not even aware of his heroic achievement. The sneer, unwittingly hurled against the aping interpreter who is fastidiously invoking the magical world of British literate culture is the intimation that only the tongue is required here. What the sycophantic English indoctrinated Black interpreter is trying unwittingly to effect is to 'rewrite Europe on the colony' - a subconscious attempt that is subconsciously annihilated by the drunken Denchira king (Baucom: 1991:8). This both subverts and subtly unveils the irrelevance of British colonial education in the affairs of the Akan kings.

The double-sidedness of this literary device is revealed by its invocation of the anti-heroic. Since Nana Kwesi Kyei

makes his great 'alcoholic discovery' by sucking desperately from a broken bottle 'like a famished baby at a mother's breast' his next shout is "I am wounded, brothers ...' (p.207). This inventive artifice projects the whole pathetic episode as a mock-heroic facade. This view is reinforced when the reader is told that 'The motion dislodged his [Nana Kwesi Kyei's] crown. The fragile shell hit the ground with a crack, and rolled unevenly towards the door' (p.208). This statement conveys not only the inherent emptiness of the Denchira king, who has no kingdom to govern, but also the precariousness of all the Fante kings, whose political authority is as decrepit as the shell crown of King Kwesi Kyei of Denchira. The vision projected here also portends the fall of the Asante empire, which the novel treats towards the end of the narrative. As if this ingenious self-conscious narrative patterning were not enough, the narrator tells us that King Amoonu, the friend of the Denchira king, 'scooped the wayward crown in mid-stride, crossed the room ... and ... replaced the crushed crown on Nana Kwesi Kyei's head'. The deep symbolic meaning unveiled by this sentence is the fact that all the crowns of the Akans, Asante included, will soon become 'ungovernable' as the British take over the whole of the Gold Coast.

Then comes the coda - the climax of the august meeting of the Fante Confederation Council - "Let's count the bottles, and divide them equally" (p.208). The text's satirical aim is revealed in the fact that this suggestion which is made by Chief Robertson, who has already lost his Akan name and is dressed in European clothes. The intended sardonic humour and the caricature are generated by the fact that the suggestion is rejected by the legendary King Kwesi Kyei of Denchira, who asserts that 'we are all kings, but there are kings among kings' (p.208). This not only evokes the divisiveness of the

world portrayed by this novel, it also reveals that the king without a kingdom forgets he is only the shadow of a king. After a heated debate and much wrangling 'the spoils of war' are divided, King Edu of Mankesim taking the lion's share of twenty bottles. The Fante kings, the text maintains, are happily aping European traditions.

The text's manipulation of human external features as an index of the inner attributes is extended to cover all characters perceived to be morally tainted one way or the other. The most graphic evidence of this creative ploy is the narrator's depiction of Ababio after he has become the king of Esuano while Densu is in Asante with Asamoa Nkwanta, the Asante general, healed by Damfo. On his return to Esuano, Densu is surprised to discover that kingship has physically transformed Ababio:

> Ababio lay comfortably sprawled on a great brass bed under a canopy of red silk. He looked fatter; his skin looked oilier, and somehow he seemed to have grown balder, though that should have been impossible. A large mirror stood at the foot of the bed. Several torches burned in the room. When the mute giant presented Densu, Ababio stared at him. (pp.298-299)

The reference to Ababio's fatness and oiliness, simply because he has become the king of Esuano during the brief period Densu was away, unequivocally sanctions the text's vision of kingship as a kind of bloated and obscene parasitic worm. Armah's use of physical appearance to create an image of moral repulsiveness is also evident in his portrayal of the Asante Queen Mother, Efua Kobri, as a parasite. This is how the narrator relates her entry into the secret war council attended by Asamoa Nkwanta, after which she sabotages the latter's plan for luring the invading British forces into the forest where they could be easily beaten:

> The last to enter the council hall was the queen mother herself, Efua Kobri. She, the elegant brown one, came wearing silk robes as usual, *her skin soft as baby's.* Seven female attendants followed her - she was travelling light today. The last of her train were three fat men - eunuchs. Among the three Densu recognized one form as surely as if he had seen Oson in broad daylight before. (p.239)

The inner moral rot of the queen mother is revealed by her betrayal of the Asante people and the text's defamiliarized portrayal of her physical attributes. Her inordinate selfishness which leads her to advise abandoning the Asante Empire to the British in order to prevent Nkwanta from achieving military victory and fame is unmasked by her soft and smooth skin, depicting her as a perfect symbol of royal exploitation and parasitism. The reference to her softness, her brown skin and her being accompanied by three fat eunuchs unleashes a number of insights. Her moral rot is evoked by the parasitic-looking oiliness of her body and the three eunuchs who attend to her selfish needs while her brown skin colour echoes the novel's repulsive portrayal of Buntui at the beginning of the novel. The brownish-skin colour of the obscene monstrous-looking giant is described as follows:

> His skin had a reddish colour, not a smooth red but a sort of unfinished-looking red. This made him look somewhat like a clay pot prematurely snatched out of the kiln that should have fired and darkened it. (p.9)

The myth which perceives man as having been moulded from clay and having to be fired in the kiln, besides its invocation of the Red Indian myth of genesis whose original didacticism relates how the black man was forgotten by the Supreme Creator in the oven of creation, hence his burnt black skin, to borrow from Desmond Tutu's 'Some African Insights and the Old Testament' (1972:16), is self-consciously inverted by this novel, intent upon its own ingenious act of de-

mythification of white racial superiority. The Fante fascination with the European ethos, which is revealed by the Anglicization of Fante names, makes deflation of the European claim to superiority on account of skin pigmentation a major concern of the novelistic histories. The symbol of black superiority and perfection, projected by the fictional histories, is the unsullied blackness of the black character. Thus, the novel spurns, rather wittily, blacks who think that they are better than their kith and kin simply because they are light-skinned and not pitch black, ultimately scoffing at the source of their naive colour superiority: the European.

Africa's cycle of disintegration, which is the thrust of this novel, is seen to be caused by the inherent ideology of kingship which is structured around the tribe. This view is powerfully confirmed when the healers try to stop the Fantes from serving as porters for the British forces about to invade the Asante:

> "Only one great difficulty faces us. At times the carriers agree with us, but say the choice is between being slaves of the Asante kings and being slaves of the whites. Then we can't give them the answer we would like to give, because we healers also see what they see: the royals of Asante do not wish the unity of black people all over this land. All they know is Asanteman. Of Ebibirman [*Abibiman*] they are totally ignorant. Wilfully so. That is the sad thing." (pp.267-268)

Damfo's view of kingship as basically a tribal structure is borne out by the Asante Imperial history. The mythical origins of the Asante Union began with the seven chiefs of the divisional states - Kumase, Mampong, Kokofu, Bekwai, Dwaben, Asumegya and Nsuta. But from the very beginning the principle of *equality* was subverted: only the Kumasihene, who was also the head of the Asante Union and is called the Asantehene, was allowed to make a stool for himself from

gold; the other six chiefs could only sit on silver stools (J.K. Fynn, 1971:20; A. Kyerematen, 1969:3).

Most critics consider the notion of healing projected by the novel as unrealistic - a didactic and idealistic framework which subverts the historicity of the novel. But the solid Akan iconographic forest of symbols which provides the backdrop to this novel seems to question this view. A historical source of the magical founding of the Asante Union by Okomfo Anokye, which is discussed by T.C McCaskie in his 'Komfo Anokye of Asante: Meaning, History and Philosophy in an African Society' appears to throw some light on the concept of healing presented by the novel. This source deals with a secret religious sect whose tale of origin was narrated by Mamponhene Kwaku Dua Agyeman. This worship was founded on 'a fetish' called "*Abonsam*", i.e. dwarfs'. It was said that the majority of the Asante community worshipped Abonsam. The Abonsam priests and the worshippers, who plaited their hair, were said to be armed with 'sharp knives and spears' - making them much dreaded by everyone. They also swore the Great Oath [*ntam kesee*] ....' But behind this worship was an elaborate political organisation which ingeniously mystified its aim of overthrowing the Asantehene with pseudo-magico religiosity. The Asantehene was finally informed and the Abonsam priests and sect were attacked and destroyed (McCaskie, 1986:333). The destruction of this secret religious movement by the Asantehene is echoed in *The Healers by* the Asante Empire's attack on and destruction of the village of healers at Praso because they are believed to have plotted with Asamoa Nkwanta to overthrow the Asante Empire. Armah's self-conscious title of the chapter (which deals with the essence of healing), 'Witch Hunt', appears to confirm the possibility that the metaphysics of healing

projected by *The Healers* might be a puritanical abstraction of the 'Abonsam secret devotees', who are now remodelled as anti-kingship illuminati bent on restructuring the society which is perceived to be irredeemably corrupted and diseased by kingship rituals. McCaskie argues that 'the *abonsamkomfo* [the priests of Abonsam - witch-doctors], in the name of Komfo Anokye, wished all at once to dissolve and to replace the existing political order' (1986:333). What is illuminating about this magico-historical source is the fact that the concept of healing as conceptualized by Damfo has the basic tenets of the *abonsamkomfo*. The only features missing are its martial, religious, and overt violent postures which are drained out, leaving only the positive values - the metaphysics of African herbal healing. To put it differently, the secret sect is virtually inverted. The bearing of arms disappears together with the plaiting of hair and the open hostility. But the general preoccupation is the same: puritanism and the replacement of the existing political order and society with a new communally-oriented society without kings. The immediacy of the metaphysics of traditional herbal healing permeates contemporary rural Africa. It is common knowledge among the initiated that herbs are endowed with 'soul' and 'mystical' life which has to be verbally invoked by the healer in order to extract their curative properties. All *sangomas,* - the repository of Africa's cultural treasures - are guided by this pantheism.

Like the other four primary texts already examined in this study, *The Healers* use the dehumanization of women in order to project its repudiation of hereditary rule in Africa. Araba Jesiwa's agony is tethered to the cycle of suffering that Mother Africa has been subjected to since time immemorial. To drive home the evil cycle of existential and

historical emptiness which wrecks this world, *The Healers* deploys the *abiku* motif: the endless cycle of conception, birth, and early death and rebirth. Abena's ritual dance which evokes only the nascent form of the symbolic cycle of *abiku* - the initiation dance, the capture and the final shackling of the initiates within the murky womb of the slave ship in *Two Thousand Seasons,* the escape and the return to Anoa only to find that slavery is re-established - has now matured into a full-blown evil cycle of *ogbanje* which torments Araba Jesiwa in *The Healers*. The novel introduces the endless cycle of the void generated by *ogbanje* with a pattern of repetition woven around Jesiwa's name, evoking the chant-like narrative mode which structures the novel:

> To the boy Densu, Araba Jesiwa talked freely, as if he were to her already an adult ....
> She talked to him of anxiety - the terror clutching at a woman's entrails ....
> She talked to him of the pain, of the fear of barrenness ....
> She talked to him of waste ....
> Araba Jesiwa loved to talk to him of hope ....
> She talked to him of change ....
> She talked to him of renewal ....
> Araba Jesiwa talked to Densu of conception ....
> She talked to him of fear ....
> And she talked to him of that indescribable bursting out of joy which had made her laugh when she felt the actual pain of childbirth.
> Araba Jesiwa talked of the pride of a mother.
> She talked of the fear that continued in spite of joy ....
> She talked of fullness ....
> And she talked of gratitude .... (pp.67-68)

Araba Jesiwa's loading of her agonized cycle of *abikus* onto Densu, who was only a boy at this point in time, reveals two crucial insights. Firstly it unveils the long mysterious bond between the motherless and fatherless Densu and his prospective spiritual mother. This, revealing her innermost and tormented soul and mind, amounts to an act of ritual

transfer of her burden of *abikus* to Densu, her future spiritual son and the supreme communal ritual carrier. This long mystic relationship between Araba Jesiwa and the boy confirms my interpretation of Densu as a carrier motif who symbolically bears all the physical, moral and spiritual burdens of the society.

The self-referential narrative mode also projects an oppressive feeling of timeless cycles of hope and despair engendered only to be crushed mercilessly. This vision of the bottomless illusions of human striving conveyed by the incessant foregrounding of 'she', 'Araba Jesiwa' and 'talked', creates, shatters and re-creates human dreams which are finally dispelled again, conveying the unending repetitiousness of the cycle of *abiku*: conception, birth, early death and re-conception, rebirth and another early death. The novel hammers home the remorseless wheel of futility and yawning emptiness which plague the African woman through this chorus-like narrative patterning. Araba Jesiwa suffers four nightmares of miscarriages:

> For years it had seemed Araba Jesiwa was fated to die childless. It was not conception she did not conceive. At least four times she welcomed man-seed in her womb and gave it space to grow into new life. Every time she had held the seed inside her with anxious care and a heartbreaking abundance of hope. But every time the new spirit she sought to welcome had refused flesh. The spirit had fled the world untried, and the abortion had turned the full hope in the would-be mother's eyes to vain water, impotently flowing.
>
> Jesiwa sought help from a veritable procession of doctors promising cures. They stuffed her stomach with scrapings from the barks of innumerable trees. They fed her scratchings from snakes, rhinos, lizards, spiders, and scorpions, a most impressive array of beasts. Each doctor promised with his concoctions to give Araba Jesiwa the key that would

> unlock her love-gift and open her to fruitful life. (pp.69-70)

The countless number of bogus healers she has to see and the catalogue of the nauseating worthless concoctions she is doomed to drink and the fact that all these lead to nothing replays the evil cycle of *abiku* which eternally torments her. The paradox of life projected by the novel is the sinister cycle of the agonizing reversals which inform human existence and history. Araba Jesiwa goes through a living hell in order to have a child. But as fate would have it, at the close of the novel she, like her namesake Araba in *Fragments*, again becomes childless when Ababio's assassin murders her only son, Prince Appia. The mutilation of Appia's corpse by Ababio, unwittingly, enigmatizes the traditional ritual of mutilating the corpse of an *ogbanje* child so that it does not continue its demonic cycle of tormenting its mother by re-entering the womb to be reborn, only to die again. Araba Jesiwa's rites of passage open on a vicious cycle of childlessness and close with the same repetitive cavernous feeling of barrenness. Her unending sufferings are presented as a mirror image of Africa's timeless tribulations. Africa, like Araba Jesiwa, is projected by the text as a mother with 'a branded womb', doomed to suffer an endless cycle of conceptions, miscarriages, and infant mortalities, and the premature deaths of her youths. Araba Jesiwa's rites of passage presage the futile attempts by the Asante Empire to halt its inevitable demise by resorting to the ancient ineffectual African mystical arts which Okomfo Anokye used to bamboozle and mystify the six Akan divisional states into surrendering their independence and becoming members of the Asante Union. But the ancient magic is now irredeemably tainted and can no longer hold the fragmented empire together.

This leads us naturally to Armah's reconstruction of the collapse of the Asante Empire. There is a critical perception that *The Healers* rejects the Eurocentric version of Asante history and endorses the recent Afrocentric interpretation which presents the Asante as a historical dinosaur shattered by superior European military hardware. Such an interpretation is only a superficial account of the novel's historical construct of the Akans. Armah's novel in fact not only dismisses the Eurocentric distorted version of Akan history but it also rejects the Afrocentric version and offers its own independent account of Akan history. The monarchical origin of the Asante Empire - the epitome of Akan legendary kingship - is perceived to be flawed from birth, accounting for its fouled history and its inevitable fall. It is obvious that *The Healers*, to borrow from Homi K. Bhabha's article, 'The other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism', self-consciously turns its back on the Western literary tradition which is perceived to be the source of African texts - from the hegemonic centre to the colonized "otherness" (Bhabha, 1985:149).

To unveil what the novel perceives as the inherent flaw of the mythical and the historical foundation of the Asante Union by Okomfo Anokye and Osei Tutu, it is necessary to present a bird's eye view of the Asante Empire from the reign of Asantehene Kofi Karikari (1867-1874) to 1896 when Asantehene Agyeman Prempeh I was exiled to the Seychelles and Asante lost its imperial power and became a British Protectorate after seventy-three years of protracted military conflicts with the British colonial power - 1823-1896 - (J.K. Fynn, 1971:19, in Michael Crowder, ed.). The 'British expeditionary force under Sir Garnet Wolseley entered Kumase and burnt it down in 1874 ...' because the Asantehene Kofi Karikari, who refused to comply with the British demand to

surrender the entire Asante Royal Family as captives to the British, escaped together with the royal notables, leaving the palace and Kumase deserted and unprotected. Later, Kyerematen asserts, 'Kofi Karikari was persuaded by his elders to abdicate' (Kyerematen, 1969:9). Kyerematen, an Asante historian, does not tell us why the Asantehene 'was persuaded to abdicate'. But J.K. Fynn, a Fante historian, demystifies the inexplicable 'abdication'. Fynn reveals that 'Kofi Karikari himself was soon destooled for rifling the royal mausoleum' (1971:42). The wheel of chaos runs on. We are told that Asantehene Kofi Karikari 'was succeeded by ... Nana Mensa Bonsu, who 'was forced to abdicate' in 1883 because of his immoral relationship 'with the wives of some of his elders'. Kyerematen's conclusions on Nana Mensa Bonsu's immorality ridicules the sexual frailty of the Asante Royal House when he declares that 'The Ashanti clearly took a serious view of the sexual morals of their rulers, even though *Anokye* had decreed that a king might have a virtually unlimited number of properly married wives - 3,333 to be precise!' (1969:9). The iconic attribute of the number three is still prominent. But the magnitude of the size of the harem, recommended by one of Okomfo Anokye's mythical laws, makes this suspect. It is more likely to be a matrimonial custom designed by sexually voracious Asantehenes long after the death of Okomfo Anokye, the ritual sacrificial carrier of Asante's immoral burdens. Nana Mensa Bonsu's successor, Kwaku Dua II died of small-pox after forty days of kingship. Kwaku Dua III (Agyeman Prempeh I) became Asantehene in 1888 after three years of chaotic interregnum, marked by violent contests for the Asante imperial crown.

At the height of this internal division, the British forces entered Kumase for the second time in 1896. This time Agyeman

Prempeh I and the divisional chiefs, conscious of the 1874 defeat, offered no resistance. Thus, not a single shot was fired at the alien invaders. Asante was handed over to the British as if it were the private property of the Asantehene and the six divisional chiefs, because the Asantehene was more interested in retaining his royal status than in protecting his subjects. Fynn's account of the humiliating way in which the legendary Asantehene and the Queen-Mother servilely 'kissed' the feet of the British officers in 1896 in their last ignominious attempt to retain their royal status - and not to save Asante - invokes more the spirit of Armah's text's historical reconstruction than the first British conquest and the burning of Kumase in 1874 during the reign of Asantehene Kofi Karikari, which forms the historical backdrop of the novel:

> The Asantehene received the column seated on a raised dias .... He wore a black crown heavily worked with gold, a silk robe and embroidered sandals. Gold and silver ornaments dangled from his wrists. Beside him sat the Queen-Mother, a composed attractive woman, surrounded by a retinue of brightly clad female attendants. The lower portions of the dias were occupied by other chiefs ....
>
> The Governor [Sir William Maxwell] ... alleged that human sacrifices had taken place since the signing of the treaty and the indemnity had not been paid ... there was no need to depose Prempeh provided he now made his submission and paid 50,000 ounces of gold.
>
> After waiting for a few minutes, clearly fighting his emotions, he and the Queen-Mother slipped off their sandals, walked across to where the British officers were sitting, prostrated themselves and embraced the feet of Maxwell and Scott. Then he declared that Asante was under the protection of the British Crown. (Fynn, 1971:45)

As Fynn argues, the British were not interested in the mere formal submission of the Asantehene. What they wanted were the gold mines and so the Asantehene, the Queen-Mother, the

King's father, his two uncles, his brother, the two war-chiefs and the others were abducted and taken to Elmina Castle, then to Sierra Leone and finally to the Seychelles where they were exiled for twenty-eight years. In the last desperate attempt to save the Asante Kingdom, Yaa Asantewaa, the intrepid Queen-Mother of Edweso, led the last fierce and bitter war of resistance against the British in 1900, but was defeated and then exiled to the Seychelles to join Agyeman Prempeh I.

If Armah had exploited the historical review which is detailed above, *The Healers* would have been more of an epical celebration than a mock-heroic epic. Instead, the author chooses to blend the mythical and the historical in such a way that the mythical and the pseudo-magico ritualization of the myth of origins becomes the dominant narrative mode which informs and moulds the novel. Perhaps this accounts for the text's concentration on Kofi Karikari whose reign witnesses the historic fall and the shattering of the sacred *kum tree* mystically planted by Okomfo Anokye during the founding of the Asante Union. This historical accident appears to provide a perfect opportunity for the novel's manipulation of the mythical origins which is linked to Okomfo Anokye and Osei Tutu. Fynn reports that on the day Asantehene Kofi Karikari wrote a reply to Sir Garnet Wolseley's letter of surrender and the payment of 50000 ounces of gold as war indemnity, the great ancient sacred *kum* tree which was 'planted in Kumasi by the famous Okomfo Anokye fell down' (Fynn, 1971:39, in Crowder, ed.). The fall of the sacred *kum* tree becomes a central symbol of *The Healers*. The text projects this accident as a portentous event auguring the fall of the Asante Empire. The collapse of Okomfo Anokye's sacred tree, the soul of the Asante Empire, is magnified through the self-

reflexive narrative patterning of bizarre omens, foreshadowing the inevitable demise of the Asante Empire.

The first omen which signals this demise is an unprecedented hail-storm whose stones are extraordinarily large. The novel intimates that the unnatural cosmic disorder is a prelude to the impending chaos about to shatter the Asante Empire through an ingeniously-structured foregrounded narrative. We are told that 'At the time when no rains were yet expected a bright day had suddenly been changed to menacing night' and 'huge clouds had come to choke the air and fill the sky'. The text manipulates self-conscious narrative techniques to hammer home Asante's impending doom. 'Lightning flashes' are described as 'fierce messengers of death looking for something to destroy', evoking the advancing British forces armed with their powerful guns. The reader is then told that the storm destroys the bright day, turning it 'into the night' (p.245). Then comes the coda:

> At midnight the clouds mumbled like an ill-tempered giant and then parted to precipitate on the astonished earth not rain, not water but a flood of hard stones. One was so large it crashed through a roof and broke the skull of a child six days old, dragging him back among his ancestors. (p.245)

The ritualistic crushing of the skull of the six-day-old baby signifies the disaster looming for Asante.

The natural calamity gives way to tragedy. The reader is told of how the Asante totemic porcupine, the fearless and invincible animal, is chased by 'a huge silver python' right inside the royal mausoleum, the sacred burial place of Asante kings, where it is caught and devoured like a harmless mouse:

> The porcupine turned to face his hunter. His quills shot out, stiff, rattling fiercely against each other. But the python flowed just as smoothly forward. When he

> reached the porcupine, without first throwing his coils on him, without attempting to stretch his prey, he swallowed him whole - quills and all. Having fed, the python did not move on. He coiled himself in a pile of circles, and laid his head on the highest coil and began the sleep of days ... He lay a whole week undisturbed ... At the end of an exact week the python began to excrete, one after the other, porcupine quills to the number of thirty. That done, the serpent disappeared .... (pp.245-246)

The ease with which the python overpowers its prey and swallows it is the most eloquent symbolic deflation of Asante's legendary image. The ritual invocation of the variant of the iconic number *three* - the *'thirty'* quills excreted by the python - is a narrative device which is persistently manipulated by *The Healers*. This narrative technique of *defamiliarization* is designed to highlight the mythically- and iconographically-oriented re-interpretation of Asante history. The 'pile of circles' suggests the endless deceptions the Asante royals and priests have manufactured in order to repair the inner cracks which permanently threaten the Asante Empire, which is paradoxically founded on the cabalistic spell originally cast by Okomfo Anokye.

The third unnatural event is that a barren woman conceives and gives birth in her eleventh month 'in exactly the blind middle of the night' to a child who talks like 'an old man who had eaten barrels of pepper and salt' as soon as he frees his head from his mother's womb' (p.246). This leads on to several other less significant omens culminating in the fall of the sacred *kum* tree.

This is the *ninth* and the final omen (a rehearsal of the iconic figure three), which is non-fictional and is reported by recorded history (see page 348). The narrator's self-referential statement about the authenticity of the collapse

of the *kum* tree reinforces my thesis that the novel's historicity is so impregnable that even events which look like creative inventions turn out to be syntheses of historical, ethnographical and mythical constructs of the Akan world order:

> Even if all the stories of omens and portents reaching Kumase were false, what happened at Kumase itself, the capital city of Asanteman founded under the kum tree by the great priest Anoche and named by him, what happened at Kumase was true ... The kum tree, planted at the nation's birth, a tree supposed unshakable, huge giant of trees, the kum tree fell ... No disease of bark or branch or root had given a single signal of impending decay. They [sic] great tree simply fell of a sudden. It was as if a hand, enormous yet unseen, had plucked it whole from the earth and dashed it in anger against the stones of the ground ... The great tree fell and was shattered into tiny pieces - a thousand and thirty fragments - as if whatever force had brought it down was not content to break it, but wanted to pulverize it completely. (p.250)

The significance attached to the historic collapse and shattering of *the sacred kum tree* is evoked by the opening sentence of this citation. The narrator not only draws the reader's attention to the historical authenticity of this omen but he also subtly challenges critics who perceive fictional events as mere fantasies. To evoke the mythic mode, the novel rehearses the origins of the Asante Empire. Asante oral history relates that in order to decide on the capital of the newly created Asante Union, two *kum* trees were planted by the famous priest, Okomfo Anokye, in two places. One of the trees died and only a small town grew there. But where the *kum* tree survived, a huge town called Kumase grew, making it the capital of Asante. Armah does not relate the entire Asante myth of origins in which Okomfo Anokye (Anoche) magically conjured the Golden Stool from the sky on that portentous Friday and made the original members of the Asante Union swear the Great Oath of allegiance to it. The Golden

Stool is traditionally called *Sika Dwa Kofi*, after the manner of an Akan child who is born on a Friday. The allusion to Anoche (Anokye) and the *sacred kum tree* in the novel enigmatizes the mythical origins. The shattering of the sacred old tree into one thousand and thirty pieces intimates that it has been drained of the juices of life, leaving it hard and brittle. The novel suggests that the ancient *kum tree* had come to be like an ancient monument rather than a living tree. It symbolizes a kingship that had stultified over the centuries and become a mere edifice waiting for the forces of nature to bring it down to earth. Thus, its fall sends shock waves through the nerve centres of the Asante Empire. We are told the Asantehene calls the priests, the representatives of Okomfo Anokye, and 'charged them to tell the truth, even if the news was bad' (p.251). The fall and the shattering of the sacred tree into fragments and the summoning of the priests re-enacts the Asante Imperial genesis, magically wrought by Okomfo Anokye.

The insight being conveyed here is how, faced with the problem of internal and external dangers coupled with the anxiety of impending political disintegration, the Akan priests mirror an inverted (degenerated) image of the pristine Asante myth of origins, by rekindling Okomfo Anokye's ancient magical strategy of spiritual mystification. The only difference here is that the religious mystification that is re-enacted by the bogus priests is divested of its sacredness and is saturated with the sacrificial blood and the abominable mutilation of innocent slaves. Their aim, it is clear, is merely to conceal their own impotence. Thus, the priests tell the Asantehene that the gods want the blood of healthy young people. And when this does not allay the fears of the Asante Royal House, the charlatans masquerading as

priests devise tortures for two sacrificial slaves whose cheeks and tongues are to be pierced with barbed arrows. The gods' acceptance of the sacrifice, the Asantehene is told, depends on how long it takes the victims to die. If they die quickly then the enemy will be halted. If the reverse occurs, then it is time for funeral songs:

> They [the priests] ordered two slaves selected for sacrificial deaths. One tried desperately to save himself from death ... He invoked all the names of the royal ancestors of Asante, from Oti Akenten to Kwaku Dua. He begged the queen-mother as a mother to save a son. To stop his pleading tongue an executioner drove a short arrow into his left cheek and through his tongue, until the iron barb at the arrow's tip came out through the right cheek.... the victims were taken away from the town, into the forest near the Swamp of the Dead, with the iron barb skewering their cheeks. Thus bleeding, they were tied fast to two trees and left to die at their own speed. (p.251)

The complexity of the novel's thick sacred grove whose meaning is lost to those without the ritual passwords is again confirmed by 'the deepseated dread of a slave's curse' which compelled the Asante executioners to render the sacrificial slave victims dumb by driving short arrows through their cheeks and tongues before sacrificing them to the impotent gods of Asante tyranny. Izevbaye (1990:134) explicates this demonic ritual-cum-ideological censorship as follows:

> In 'The Executioner's Dream', for example, Kwesi Brew re-creates the deepseated dread of a slave's curse in the pre-colonial Ashanti Kingdom. This fear gave rise to a cruel ritual during which the slave's tongue was transfixed before his execution to prevent the utterance of a final curse that could be fatal to his executioners. Although the practice is shrouded in ritual and a belief in the active force of the spoken word, it requires no special imagination for one to see that such a practice had a rational basis, not only as a projection of the despot's guilt, but also as a pre-emptive strike against a potential agent of propaganda against the state.

(Izevbaye, 1990:134)

Izevbaye's comment not only endorses the thrust of *The Healers* - that traditional African rituals and customs presented by the ruling elite as pristine cultural values created for the welfare of the larger community are nothing but lies fabricated by the corrupt tyrants for perpetuation of their fouled warrior-kingship - but also reaffirms the mythic Akan background of the novel. The driving of arrows through the cheeks and tongues of the slaves about to be sacrificed which appears to be an imaginative invention, turns out to be a ritual motif from Asante's cruel and tyrannical past. The villainy of kingship and destructiveness of slave culture appear to have reached a zenith in the Asante Empire. There is the persistent intimation that the fall of the Asante nation stems from the irredeemable rottenness and destructiveness of institutionalized slavery in Asante. The Asante nation has become a monstrous evil forest covered with centuries of decomposed bodies of slaves slaughtered for impotent gods by impotent quacks posing as priests.

The preoccupation of Armah's project is brilliantly articulated by Stephen Slemon in his illuminating article, 'Monuments of the Empire: Allegory/Counter-Discourse/Post-Colonial Writing' (1987). The revised insight makes the thrust of *The Healers* transparent if we substitute 'the Asante myth of origins' for Slemon's 'allegory'. Thus the Asante myth of origins magically created by the fabulous priest, Okomfo Anokye, 'becomes a site upon which post-colonial culture(s) seeks to contest and subvert colonialist appropriation through the production of a literary, and specifically anti-imperialist, figurative opposition or

textual *cultural-discourse'* (1987:11). The novel's postcolonial ploy constitutes a radical counter-hegemonic discourse which eschews European historiography grounded on recorded history a historical mode of interpretation based solely on orally-transmitted historical sources. Wole Ogundele's view in his article 'Orality versus Literacy in Mazisi Kunene's *Emperor Shaka the Great'* articulates this trend of rivalry between the Western literary tradition and the African oral tradition as follows:

> For a small minority, however, two traditions exist in a state of rivalry, and literature is more or less equated with history. Mazisi Kunene and Okot p'Bitek are the champions of this view; for them oral literature is superior to written literature in all its ramifications and the earlier the African artist returns to it, the better. Their view represents a brand of cultural autonomy in which literature is the sum-total of history and culture, and yet somehow bears no structural relationship with other spheres of contemporary African experience and awareness.
>
> (Ogundele, 1992:9)

Ogundele's observation helps clarify Armah's narrative strategies. The reflexive self-alienating narratorial intrusion which opens this novel - an overt rejection of the Western literary tradition - is now extended to cover historical interpretation. The text is self-consciously engaged in a systematic re-Africanisation of historiography. By re-interpreting Asante history purely through its myth of origins, Armah seriously questions the claim that the Western world is the keeper of universal treasures of knowledge. The novel projects its concept of history by asserting that history not only manifests in written records but also in oral forms. It is also intimated that the recorded sources are always tainted either with indigenous official biases or with alien imperialist ideology which undermine its objectivity.

This deterministic and self-consciously traditionalised version of African history is again demystified by Armah's own comment on historiography:

> In colonial Africa, this tendency took protean forms: in historiography, for example, Western hegemonism created the fashion according to which the only genuine history was the history of Westerners in Africa; the West was supposed to have brought Africans into the stream of history by colonizing Africa.
>
> (Armah, 1984:41)

Clearly, this reveals the ideological and the didactic impulse which informs and shapes *The Healers*, particularly its reliance on the Asante myth of genesis for its re-interpretation of the fall of this empire. This is the novel's most powerful anti-imperialist orientation. Armah's stylistic programme, it must be reiterated, is a two-pronged literary weaponry which smashes both the British colonizers and the indigenous power-drunk tyrants together with their cohorts. *The Healers* contends that the Asante myth of origins is historically flawed and that this original weakness continues to be exploited by the Asantehenes. The foundations of the Asante Empire, the text maintains, were laid by Okomfo Anokye, the cunning expert in occult arts, who knew how to manipulate his people's inherent addiction to the supernatural. Okomfo Anokye created, through an uncanny cabalistic deception, an empire which lasted for nearly two centuries before the magic began to wear off. The text posits that Okomfo Anokye's clever ruse worked as long as the Asante community believed in its efficacy. This thesis is confirmed by McCaskie, who asserts that 'the political dissonances of the last quarter of the nineteenth century are essentially attributed to a wilful flouting ... of Komfo Anokye's societal axioms' (1986:331). Over a period of time, Asantehenes introduced all kinds of tyrannical and cruel measures which they claimed to be laws/customs that were

originally created by Okomfo Anokye. As long as Anokye's magical spell worked, there was no internal jostling for power. Thus Okomfo Anokye becomes a mythical sacrificial motif -a ritual carrier who bears the burdens of the corrupt and tyrannical Asantehenes who took over from Osei Tutu, the first Asantehene. The fall of the *kum* tree is a symbolic explosion of the myth of origins which in turn signifies the death of the Asante Union. *The Healers* contends that the Asante Empire died with the fall of the sacred *kum* tree which is the spiritual embodiment of the empire. What Wolseley and his soldiers claim they have conquered is only the decayed remains of a mummified empire that had shattered into smithereens. The work's manipulation of the reaction of the Asante Royal House to the British invasion confirms, further, that Asante is symbolically dead before the British attack and that this demise is triggered by inner rot and is self-inflicted.

Asante's spiritual death which is symbolized by the swallowing of the totemic porcupine by the silver python and the fall of *the sacred kum tree* is now rationally confirmed by the text. The reaffirmation of the demise is projected through the Asante Royal House's sabotage of Asamoa Nkwanta's battle plan of defence against the British invading army. This view is powerfully confirmed by Derek Wright when he concludes in his 'Critical and Historical Fictions: Robert Fraser's Reading of Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Healers*' that 'advised by his mother ... the Asantehene is persuaded to sabotage Asamoa Nkwanta's plan and throw in his lot with the whites: thus he destroys his kingdom to keep his crown' (1988:75). The moral stench of African kingship, *The Healers* maintains, stems from the fact that its basic foundation is nourished by pseudo-supernatural legendary tradition which projects the kings as divine supremos ordained to rule - a

divine kingship fed by the innate superstition of the ruled. The weakening of this inherent superstitiousness of the African, it is intimated, signals the crumbling of African kingship rituals. McCaskie confirms this perception when he declares that 'Aggression, quirkiness, apparent self-sufficiency and defiance in Asante history are methods of bombastic disguise' (1986:330). The flawed origins of Asante kingship and African legendary tradition in general, the novel contends, makes the system highly vulnerable to alien conquest and domination.

Like *Two Thousand Seasons, The Healers* is dismissed by some critics for being unrealistic and unhistorical. Izevbaye delimits the relationship between art and reality, defining 'art as an illusion of reality.' The real paradox of art and the notion of 'artistic reality of literature', he says, is the curious relationship between 'art and text'. What has occurred in this novel is the reverse of Izevbaye's definition. In *The Healers*, art becomes reality cloaked in the illusion of fiction - a situation in which the real cultural living world of the Akans is masked in art. The reader who is uninformed of the Akan heritage (even though he is an Akan) might perceive fantasy while there is none because the cultural reality and history of the Akans are ingeniously shrouded in a marvellously seductive fiction. It is interesting to note that Kofi Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother* employs the same device - concealing facets of Ewe existential realism within the garb of fictional illusion. Some of the flamboyant and ravaged destitutes who inhere the fictional world of this novel happen to be real men who either lived or are still living in Keta (Ghana), where I once lived. The author does not even bother to mask the names of ABOTSI, and BENEZA, whose real life situations are

manipulated by the novel (Awoonor, 1972:68-74). But Armah enigmatizes and veils his sources in fictionality by refurbishing his inherited material and forms and by renaming the original sources - a creative process of abstraction. Thus the work which Lindfors dismisses as 'a comic-strip history' is not only grounded on Akan history but also is solidly anchored in Akan oral traditions and metaphysics.

Perhaps the basic root cause of the gross misreading of this novel stems from its elusive surface simplicity which conceals the text's labyrinthine Akan oral backdrop, bordering on a complex ethno-history. To crack open the complicated Akan iconographic background of *The Healers* requires what Frank Kermode's *The Genesis of Secrecy* describes as 'the circumcised ear' (1979:3). The text's manipulation of traditional forms and motifs invokes multi-dimensional ritual fancy which conceals the deeper insights from 'outsiders', creating a situation in which the iconic gems of the novel are more likely to remain a closed door to 'uninitiated insiders' and 'outsiders' unwilling to become Hermes or *Legba* himself. In his review article on *Two Thousand Seasons*, 'Ayi Kwei Armah's Vision of African Reciprocity', Charles Larson argues that the Ghanaian readership rejected this novel when it was serialized and that Armah '*has become a literary askari, writing for colons*' (Larson, 1974:119; emphasis mine). *The Healers*, which clearly targets the indigenous reader, appears to have deflated this castigation. The failures of some of the critics to enter the heart of the novel, which is a *defamiliarized* reassembly of Akan motifs and icons, and their concentration on its superficial manifestations are ironically exposed by the hyper-emotional and negative tones of their own critical projects.

NOTES

1. "*Adamfo*" is an Akan word which means "a friend".

2. The Akan word *Akwa* is defined by Arhin as the 'generic name for a wrestler'. It seems that *Kwao*, Buntui's first name, is a corruption of this name, for Buntui's obscene strength lacks the nimbleness required by the wrestler and relies solely on brute strength.

3. The *atumpan* drums are traditional ritual war drums which are used in pre-colonial Gold Coast in sending iconic messages to allies. They are literally called 'talking drums'.

4. In his *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (1980:39), John Hope Franklin exposes the ancient institution of slavery in Africa as follows:

> Slavery was an important feature of African social and economic life. The institution was widespread and was perhaps as old as African society itself...Slaves were usually regarded as the property of the chief of the tribe or the head of the family...Some, however, were sold and exported from the country, while others were sacrificed by kings in the worship of their royal ancestors (p.21).

The role of the chiefs in the institutionalization of slavery is further demystified by Franklin as follows :

> The usual procedure was to go to the chief of the tribe and to make arrangements with him and to secure "permission" to trade on his domain. The chief, after being properly persuaded with gifts, then appointed various assistants who were at the disposal of the trader. Foremost among these was the caboceer, who assumed the responsibility of gathering up those to be sold - *at prices previously agreed upon between the trader and the chief*. [Italics mine]

Chapter 7

Conclusion:
The Metamorphosis of
Traditional African Epic Heroism

Owing to Africa's long history of foreign domination and denigration, which is revealed by the existence of a forest of European and Arab myths about the Dark Continent, it has become necessary for African and Black writers from the diaspora to dismantle the Euro-Arab distortions and to create a counter-image for Africa. The idealized counter-image crafted for the disfigured continent is always centred around the splendour generated by Africa's fabulous empires and their legendary rulers. This propensity to romanticize Africa's legendary tradition permeates Black writing, stretching from Antar's 'Antar Romance' (c. 615 AD) - the earliest known writing by a displaced African slave living in Europe - to the writing of the post-independence era writers of the sixties.

The period of celebratory literature was followed by the literary revolt by African writers, who have become increasingly aware of Africa's betrayal by modern African leaders, whose tyrannical and exploitative political antics are linked with those of their predecessors, the legendary warrior-kings of pre-colonial Africa. Jolted by disillusionment consequent on the widespread corruption and dictatorship which followed Africa's independence, the postcolonial African writers resorted to works of art that are marked by demonic anger and irreverence. The African writers who once celebrated nationalist heroes of independent Africa and their precursors, the fabulous god-like kings, already gilded in the legends and annals of African history, now contemptuously dismiss Africa's ruling elite as miscreants and bloody tyrants. The literature which grows

from this vision divests pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial African rulers of what is perceived as their false glory.

The bulk of the corpus of African colonial writing celebrates traditional Africa and the image of the warrior-chief. One does not expect African works written during this period to assault the image of traditional rulers, who were collectively deemed to be the champions and the protectors of the colonized and the brutalized Africans in the face of colonial injustice and brutality. It is also fashionable to fit the African writers who wrote and published their works during the heyday of imperialism and colonization into a neat colonialist Christian literary compartment, an ideological and literary cul-de-sac. The works of Africa's colonial literary pioneers are relegated by modern criticism to a self-contained paradigm because they are perceived to be ideologically neo-colonialist and are considered mere echoes of the colonialist Christian literary models. The works of their heirs, the postcolonial African writers, on the other hand, are positively evaluated as being anti-colonialist while the authors themselves are portrayed as having attained Afrocentric political ideological self-illumination. Thus the postcolonial African writers are perceived as radical anti-colonialist iconoclasts who deflate both the degrading Eurocentric myths of Africa and the fabulous ideologically fabricated legends of despotic god-like kings and their successors, the modern corrupt political leaders of Africa.

This investigation, however, reveals that the literary seeds of the anti-epic heroism or counter-tyrannical posture - the satirical assault against indigenous despotism and the brutalization of the weak and the powerless masses of Africa, currently pushed to unprecedented heights by Ouologuem and Armah in their works - were planted by Mofolo and Plaatje during the colonial era.

One interesting finding which comes to light is the fact that Black South Africans who never experienced the trauma of the Middle Passage were the first to create works which assault traditional African epic heroism and African warrior-kingship rituals while West African writers, who bore the brunt of the slave trade, celebrate the pre-colonial African Golden Age, which was symbolized by African legendary heroism. Horton's *West African Countries and People ... and Vindication of the African Race* (1868), Attoh-Ahumah's *Memoirs of West African Celebrities* (1905), Casely-Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911), which revere the past, are written by West Africans while Molema's *The Bantu: Past and Present* (1920), Mofolo's *Chaka* (1925) and Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1930), which lampoon indigenous African warrior-kingship tyranny which is fed by traditional African epic heroism were written by Black South Africans. The literary movement from celebratory writing to one shaped by demonic anger against traditional African epic heroism only occurred in West Africa and the rest of the continent from the colonial period to the late sixties. There is evidence to suggest that the early development of the anti-epic genre in Southern Africa stems from the *difaqane* - the destructive wars of Calamity which swept over Southern Africa during the nineteenth century. The devastating brutality and the holocaustic aftermath of the *difaqane* have created deep-seated ethnic hostilities which gave rise to myths that portray the powerful heroes of this era as the butchers of the weaker and defenceless tribes. Significantly, the three South African works cited above were all written by the descendants of the victims of the *difaqane*.

The tendency among Africa's weak ethnic communities to embrace colonialist Christian values more readily than the powerful warrior-oriented communities is confirmed by even casual analysis of African colonial history. Pre-colonial and colonial Ghana reveals contrary views about the ideal man or the admirable man. Kwame Arhin (1983:3) demonstrates that the warrior-oriented Asante kingdom's notion of the ideal man is

centred around warrior-kingship rituals while that of the Fante is evoked by colonialist Christian education and values. The Nguni-Sotho/Tswana polarity in Southern Africa reveals the same paradigm. While the Nguni worship warrior-kingship rituals and traditionalism, the Sotho and the Tswana appear to be more influenced by colonialist Christian ethos and this is revealed by the fact that there is more tendency to use Christian names among the Sotho and the Tswana than among the Nguni. Armah satirises this proclivity among the Fante of Ghana. The attitudes of the colonial and postcolonial writers - Mofolo and Plaatje versus Ouologuem and Armah - to the traditional African epic heroism and their manipulations of the epic genre reveal a fascinating metamorphosis.

Mofolo's manipulation of traditional African epic heroism is the most elaborate and the most complex. *Chaka* deploys two conflicting narrative voices: the traditional bardic narrator, whose point of view operates at the surface level of the novel, and the anti-traditional/neo-traditional narrator whose ironic subversive commentary is initially veiled and becomes overt only after Chaka has become king. The two antithetical discourses, one sneering and the other indulging in half-hearted praise singing, function simultaneously. The entire arsenal of the epic generic attributes are evoked to celebrate the hero and are then swiftly subverted and reversed. The accumulative effect is that the epic hero is gradually transformed into an epic villain or 'an inverted epic hero', whose generic identity is concealed by the epic heroic garb in which he has been clothed by the author. The novel re-defines the traditional notion of the admirable man. The epic index of martial ferocity is replaced by a new ideal - the epic heroic ideal devoted to protecting the weak and the defenceless from the martially powerful and despotic communities.

Unlike *Chaka*, Plaatje's *Mhudi* assimilates only the rudiments of the African epic tradition. This is because the text incorporates the European literary mode of romance, which gives the novel its basic structure. Plaatje relies heavily on the juxtaposition of anti-heroic/caricature and the epic heroic models in effecting his repudiation of traditional African epic heroism. By contrasting the ludicrous antics of Ra-Thaga's mimicry of the legendary hero with Mhudi, the epic heroine, who is portrayed faithfully in accordance with the traditional African epic heroism, Plaatje prepares the reader for his eventual deflation of Mzilikazi, the epitome of the African legendary tradition. The novel extends its caricature of epic heroism to the Boers by satirizing the budding Boer epic hero, de Villiers. The novel's manipulation of the contrast between Ra-Thaga's legendary ambitions and those of his Boer friend, de Villiers, highlights the view that the notion of the legendary/epic hero as the ideal man is not confined to the Black people. Man's addiction to legendary heroism, the novel intimates, is a universal phenomenon. But the novel appears to suggest that Africa is completely seduced by the legendary tradition, perceived as the root of its political culture of tyranny. Thus, Mofolo and Plaatje reject Africa's traditional epic heroism as a lop-sided concept of the ideal African man - a heroic ideal centred around bloodshed and destruction of the weak by the powerful.

The anti-traditional epic heroism which was initiated during the colonial era by the South African writers, Mofolo and Plaatje, finds new depths in Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*, and in Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*.

In Ouologuem's work, the epic genre is eclectically manipulated. By evoking both the traditional African epic genre and the historical mode, Ouologuem presents a thesis which contends that the African oral traditions are defiled by the griots, members of the hereditary caste of the ruling elite, who naively flavour their oral projects with Islamic

pseudo-spiritual alerts which are ideologically designed to maximize the political power and glorify the image of the debauched and hollow god-like Saifs. Ouologuem's posture towards the traditional African epic genre is an elaboration on Mofolo's and Plaatje's views. The vision that the tradition itself is of Arabian-Islamic origin reinforces the argument for its dismissal as the ideal concept of the admirable man. The novel's ingenious use of the historical mode also heightens the text's repudiation of traditional African epic heroism. This is achieved by portraying the model epic hero, Saif Isaac el-Heit, as an Arab askari who is nothing but a puppet of Arabian-Islamic imperialism. Thus not only are the oral traditions of the entire Moslem Africa deemed to be polluted by Islamic ideology and imperialism, but Africa's legendary tradition which feeds the continent's epic genre as a whole is perceived as tainted with the Islamic and Arabian ethos. The novel argues that there are no pristine African oral traditions or heritage awaiting retrieval.

Like Ouologuem in *Bound to Violence*, Armah in *Two Thousand Seasons* contends that the legendary tradition and kingship rituals were imported from Arabia. To effect his repudiation of the flamboyant African epic heroism, Armah parodies the epic genre. Using parody-cum-caricature, the author divests Africa's fabulous god-like kings of their bogus self-deification and fabricated glory. Armah maintains that the marvellous legends of the past are nothing but fabrications that were ideologically created by the griots, whom he treats as literary prostitutes who sell their services to powerful men for crumbs from the tables of tyranny. While Mofolo faithfully shrouds his anti-epic hero within the African epic structure, Armah, who regards the epic tradition of bombastic praise singing as an index of racial infancy, inverts the African epic elements of glorification. Instead of the exaltation which follows the epic climactic alerts, Armah uses the panegyric for condemnation of the hollow tyrants and

for lamentation for 'two thousand seasons' of slavery and destruction, perpetuated by the indigenous Akan-slave kings and their mentors, the European 'destroyers' and the Arab 'predators', which the Black people must endure before they can find reprieve.

The virtuosity of Armah's adaptation of the African epic genre in *The Healers*, his last novel, is not only fascinating but also an elaboration of his use of African orature in *Two Thousand Seasons*. In *The Healers* the self-conscious inversion of praise singing which shapes and informs the first novelistic history gives way to the experimental invocation of existing Akan traditions which unveil the foulness of the African legendary tradition. The bombastic martial tradition which defines the Asante view of the ideal man as ferocious warrior is rejected as a hollow posture which conceals the inner cracks and contradictions of the Asante Empire. The novel's eclecticism is fed by its repertoire of generic modes which are compounded by a multiplicity of Akan traditional motifs. This novel's point of departure from the earlier novel's parody of the epic folk narrative arises from its innovative manipulation of the Akan iconic forest of symbols. By giving his hero the name, Densu, Armah enigmatizes the mythic density of the three-headed and six-armed Akan river deity, Densu, whose mythic-cum-sacred name is deployed to evoke the ancient divine stature of the epic hero without contradicting his anti-epic posture which questions the supernatural and the fabulous attributes of traditional African epic heroism.

All five works under scrutiny reveal distinct varying attitudes towards African kingship rituals. Both Mofolo and Plaatje remain within the African tradition which celebrates the institution of kingship. Their point of departures from Armah and to a lesser extent, Ouologuem, is the re-definition of the ideal king. The old concept of using martial ferocity as an index of the legendary hero is rejected in favour of a

hero whose preoccupation is with the general welfare of the larger African community. Empire-building which has been used as the excuse for destructive wars of conquest and expansion is condemned by both writers. Cunning and diplomacy are recommended as the only viable means since nation-building, it is intimated, must be achieved without wanton destruction of human life.

This conservative anti-warrior-kingship stance is magnified in both Ouologuem's and Armah's works. Though Ouologuem does not directly reject hereditary rule, his pervasive and iconoclastic dismantling of Africa's kingship rituals - a demonic repudiation which sweeps away all Africa's heritage and history - amounts to a dismissal of kingship rituals as a covert Arabian-Islamic hegemony. Armah, however, does not resort to any oblique treatment in his *Two Thousand Seasons* in which he dismisses outright hereditary rule as an alien import from Arabia, intimating that there was a pre-dynastic era in Africa before the Arabian-Islamic invasion of the continent. It is on this that Armah and Ouologuem differ, for while Armah believes in a pristine collective racial memory, Ouologuem argues that there is no such undefiled African heritage awaiting retrieval. In the final analysis, however, Mofolo, Plaatje, Ouologuem and Armah all regard the fabulous tyrannical god-like kings of Africa as false heroes whose fabricated glory had to be deflated in their reconstruction of Africa's history. The differences revealed by their works are a reflection of their times and their individual creative visions. Both Mofolo and Plaatje portray pre-*difaqane* Southern Africa as an Edenic paradise which was destroyed by the Nguni warrior-kings - a paradisal re-creation which evokes more of pastoral nostalgia for the pre-colonial Africa than a historical realism of colonial Africa within which *Chaka* and *Mhudi* are set. Besides this, the primitive idyllic life of peace and bliss which is presented by the two novels runs counter to the collective African notion of the Golden

Age built around the various periods of the rise of great empires and kingdoms in Africa.

The later writers, Ouologuem and Armah, interpret the past in terms of the present and the future. While Mofolo and Plaatje concentrate more on the past, Ouologuem and Armah link present follies to past foibles. The modern corrupt despotic leaders of Africa are perceived as a natural progression from the tyrannical god-like kings of pre-colonial Africa. Thus the praise singing which is condemned by Mofolo and Plaatje is rehearsed in Ouologuem's and Armah's works because modern African rulers have converted them into bombastic praise names in their attempts to legitimise their rule and maximize their political power. The deconstructed history of Africa in these modern novels becomes a cycle of disasters and betrayals - a deterministic re-interpretation of African history which projects progress as a repeated cycle of illusions. The crucial feature that separates the later writers from the colonial writers is their allegiance to the fictional and historical impulses which mould Mofolo's *Chaka* and Plaatje's *Mhudi* but gives way to the didactic in Ouologuem's and Armah's works.

Another crucial topic which permeates the five works is their portrayal of women and their attitudes to the traditional African view on the status of women. Although Mofolo's treatment of the topic is rather oblique, he intimates that Chaka's empire treats women shabbily. His delineation of women subtly questions the servile role imposed upon them by despotic warrior-kings and, in general, traditional Africa. Plaatje's vision is more radical than that of Mofolo. Through the ingenious juxtaposition of Ra-Thaga, the anti-epic hero, and Mhudi, the model epic heroine, Plaatje punctures the self-inflated male ego, replacing it with the solid charismatic personality of Mhudi. This is paralleled by the similar portrayal of Umnandi as the positive force behind the throne of Mzilikazi, the ideal warrior-king. Umnandi and

Mhudi are together presented as the symbols of Mother Africa - the ideal African women.

Ouologuem's work deals with this theme as well. But *Bound to Violence* is more of a rehearsal of traditional Africa's brutalization of women. Like Mofolo, Ouologuem only relives the subservient and agonizing destiny of the African women and no attempt is made to reverse the traditional pattern. Armah's treatment of the theme in *Two Thousand Seasons* is more akin to that of Plaatje in that his composite heroic ideal is a collective assemblement - a group led by Isanusi. This communal amalgam is made of female visionaries whose focalization moulds the novel's point of view. The most powerful illustration of this view is the fact that the mythological-cum-allegorical matrix which shapes the novel is provided by the Prophetess Anoa. Whereas Armah presents women as the doers who briefly liberate the community from Arab machinations and enslavement, the men are perceived as parasites and perverts.

The projection of women as visionaries is further elaborated by Armah in *The Healers* though the dichotomy of the naive male and sharp-witted female appears to be less polarized in this novel that in *Two Thousand Seasons*. The didactic aim of Armah's two novelistic histories is to reverse the notion of female inferiority and this seems to be powerfully articulated by both works.

In *Chaka* and in *Mhudi,* Mofolo and Plaatje were influenced by the constraints of the colonialist Christian system they were forced to use in publishing their works. The anti-imperial postures of the two authors are muted and oblique. While Mofolo deliberately omits Europeans from his work, Plaatje treats them but somewhat ambiguously.

Both Ouologuem and Armah self-consciously project the anti-European hegemony in their works. But whereas Ouologuem

manipulates European literary models freely in his work, Armah overtly grounds his two fictional histories on African literary models. In *Two Thousand Seasons*, the stylistic patterning is built around a parodist epic genre and an Akan incantatory ritual language which is used by visionaries in communion with ancestral spirits. In this novel, Armah not only manipulates a re-Africanised style, but he also adopts an authoritative and formal tone of what Campbell calls 'the high mimetic mode' - the stylistic tone often used in epics and tragedy. In *The Healers*, Armah takes the theme of re-Africanisation of African literature further by encapsulating the novel within the Akan iconic crucible of mystic and mythic symbols - an Akan creative alchemy which locks the deeper insights of the novel away from uninformed outsiders and the uninitiated insiders.

The African epic genre has undergone a tremendous transformation ever since Mofolo and Plaatje - the first African iconoclastic writers - sowed the first seeds of the literary subversion of Africa's tyrannical rulers. Armah's constant acknowledgement of his debt to Mofolo and his self-referential traditionalising of Mofolo's *Chaka* in *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers* confirms this view. Jonathan Ngate's *Francophone African Fiction* (1988) articulates the central concern of this research. Ngate argues that modern Francophone African novels:

> ... deal with a world in which *the efficacy* of the call to the Ancestors as well as the Ancestors themselves is seriously called into question. Disillusioned with the new African republics and the new leaders who had had so much to say about ancestral wisdom, narrators of these novels are very much engaged in what may be properly labelled a politics of anger. The satire that results leaves little room for a too easy celebration of Africa. (Ngate, 1988:59)

Ngate's insight not only reaffirms the thrust of Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*, which is one of the key texts in this study, but also the preoccupations of Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*. What is pertinent, however, is the

fact that the contemporary African literary tradition of 'narrators of politics of anger' (Ngate, 1988:59) - as well as the narrative strategies and themes of cynical iconoclasm Ngate alludes to - is naturally linked to Mofolo's *Chaka* and Plaatje's *Mhudi*, the precursors of this narrative mode.

Two distinct conflicting ideological viewpoints, however, have emerged concerning Africa's Golden Age. While creative writers, as revealed by the results of this investigation, perceive both the pre-European and colonial traditional African warrior-kings and their inheritors, the contemporary political leaders, as betrayers of Mother Africa, non-creative writers still celebrate the fabulous god-like tyrants of pre-colonial Africa and direct all the venom of their criticism only at the modern rulers of the Dark Continent. This view is confirmed by Ayittey's *Africa Betrayed* (1992), which virulently lampoons modern Africa's rulers while romanticizing the traditional legendary heroes of the past and recommending traditional African political institutions as the ultimate solution to Africa's chronic tyranny. His thesis, which is an abstraction of the pristine values of pre-colonial Africa, which despotic warrior-kings subverted and transformed into instruments of the rule of tyranny, ideologically and dialectically glosses over the destructive and tyrannical features of the traditional political system. Ayittey's celebratory views of the Golden Age of pre-colonial Africa are articulated in his chapter entitled 'Indigenous African Political Institutions' (Ayittey, 1992:37-77) and also in his earlier work, appropriately entitled *Indigenous African Institutions* (1991). *Africa Betrayed*, overtly, celebrates the ruling elite of pre-colonial Africa while repudiating the contemporary African political leaders:

> Give Africa back to its traditional rulers. Often denigrated as "illiterate and backward", these rulers showed intellectual maturity far superior to that of many educated heads of state. The chiefs not only tolerated but also solicited alternative viewpoints.
> (Ayittey, 1992:228)

Thus the traditional monolithic romanticized image of pre-colonial Africa is now subverted internally by two diametrically opposed literary views from Black Africa itself.

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