

Cultural Innocence, Commitment and Education in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine and The Great Ponds*

Victor O. Ogbeide

*Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Ado Ekiti, Ado-Ekiti,
Ekiti State, Nigeria*

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ABSTRACT This paper explores the cultural experience of the Africans before the advent of colonialism and contends that given the people's rich culture which made their lives meaningful, there was no way the colonialists could have described them as primitive to justify their colonialism. The paper concludes that the two novels' lack of artistic immediacy is compensated for in the area of education and re-education which the novelist subtly and creatively invests in the two works.

INTRODUCTION

It is debatable whether Ernest Emenyonu had a novelist like Elechi Amadi in mind when he remarked some years ago, inter alia, that "African literature to some people constitutes a tool for the literate African arrogation of the essence of his cultural heritage – an assertion and at times an imposition of the contents and excellence of black culture - on a white dominated world" (1979:1). This view is perhaps, germane here. For, while the first generation African novel is characterized predominantly by cultural rehabilitation as pioneered by Chinua Achebe, this preoccupation seems to have been carried to a decisive conclusion with the literary art of Elechi Amadi. In fact, Amadi's trilogy – *The Concubine*, *The Great Ponds* and *The Slave*, is firmly rooted in African cultural milieu. Amadi's fictional world is one of tradition, especially tradition in its pristine innocence before the coming of the rampaging forces of colonialism.

Amadi's literary objective in this direction has been succinctly stated by Ebele Eko (1991:26):

Elechi Amadi sets out to recreate with vivid images of rural world as it has always existed, yet one that the artist is very aware is fast passing away. It is an enclosed, isolated, yet sufficient self-dependent little world of ordinary men and women living ordinary everyday lives of farming, fishing, buying and selling, tapping, mourning, rejoicing, exchanging visits and co-operating in many ways on a daily basis.

Unfortunately, this "rural world" which is

synecdochic of pre-colonial Africa can hardly be said to have been fully explored by literary critics. Adewoye (1996) and Eko (1991), for example, only make scanty references to it while others like Niyi Osundare and Eileen Sweeney are only preoccupied with the role of the uncanny supernatural deities and overall techniques in Amadi's works respectively. My task, therefore, in this paper is to explore this rather enclosed world in its pristine innocence. Obviously, this preoccupation with his people's way of life is synonymous with a lack of artistic immediacy. In addition, therefore, this paper hopes to examine Amadi's notion of literary commitment in the two works in focus and its role in educating and re-educating Africans and non-Africans.

"Cultural innocence" as used in this paper does not imply that the people lived a sub-cultured life devoid of the standard of a civilized society. In fact, as recreated by Amadi, the Ikwerre people of the southern part of Nigeria in West Africa lived a very sophisticated cultural life that was supervised by communal laws and social harmony. "Innocence" as used here refers to this state of affairs of the local people before the colonialists came to superimpose their culture on them. The superimposed culture was not necessarily better or more "civilized". Every culture exists for the good of the people and the superimposed culture only came to make things fall apart for the local people rather than for their own good. In all Amadi's novels, none, perhaps, demonstrates his artistic portrayal of a restricted rural environment unsullied by westernization than *The Concubine* (1966).

PRISTINE CULTURAL INNOCENCE IN *THE CONCUBINE*

Set in a rather limited geographical rural environment of Omokachi, *The Concubine* is an artistic portrayal of a people's pre-colonial way of life against the background of the problem of young love and man's relationship with the gods. In fact, according to Sam Adewoye, the novel is "a strange but nonetheless desirable co-operation between the material and the supersensible word" (1996:77).

The Concubine tells the story of Ihuoma, a typical "femme fatale", an extremely beautiful and good woman, who unfortunately, finds it difficult to lead a normal love life especially where the issue of marriage is concerned. Like the classical siren, she "lures" men to their death with her bewitching beauty and song. Her first marriage ends with the sudden death of her husband while her attempt to remarry spells doom for her would-be husband on the eve of the marriage. In all, three different men interact with her in different ways and all come to the same grim and mysteriously tragic end, although the manner of death varies from one to the other.

First on line is the adorable and powerful wrestler, Emenike, who had married the eclipsing beauty of a girl Ihuoma to the envy and jealousy of other young men in the village of Omokachi before the story starts. The marriage which initially seems a perfect match for the two young persons only lasts for six memorable years producing three lovely children before tragedy strikes. Emenike has a deadly encounter in the forest with the greedy Madume, his archrival in land and in love. He suffers a serious injury from which he seems to have recovered temporarily only to die mysteriously afterwards of lock-chest.

Madume, the big-eye is the next victim. Taking advantage of Ihuoma's widowhood he makes a fresh bid to win her hand in marriage but fails. He then decides to press his claim to a piece of land in dispute earlier resolved in favour of the late Emenike. A chance meeting with Ihuoma on the disputed land leads to a violent argument which results in a brief encounter with Nnamdi, Ihuoma's brother-in-law, but is quickly resolved by neighbours. But just as Madume tries to harvest a plantain on the land to complete his sense of triumph, a spitting

cobra which seems to appear from nowhere attacks him on the face and glides rapidly away.

Madume goes completely blind. As a result of this, he becomes increasingly withdrawn and highly temperamental. His wife, Wolu and children who have become suspicious of Madume's dangerous moods eventually desert him. In frustration, he hangs himself – a most unclean way to die. His body is thrown into the evil forest called Minita – the place reserved for such rejected corpses.

Then comes the long and sensational romance with Ekwueme, a dashing young man slightly older than Ihuoma. As far as Omokachi is concerned Ekwueme is the most eligible bachelor available. But there are obstacles. Ihuoma is not favourably disposed to remarry while Ekwueme himself has had a childhood engagement with the peevish Ahurole who now imposes on him to forestall the affair with Ihuoma. To make unwilling Ekwueme love her, Ahurole resorts to a love potion which later turns her husband's head and drives him mad. He eventually recovers after being treated by Anyika, the famous medicine man but with Ihuoma playing a prominent role in the process. The issue of marriage between Ekwueme and Ihuoma resurfaces but Anyika warns seriously against it. Ihuoma, he says, belongs to the sea, in effect a sea goddess and a favourite of the dreaded sea-king who is extremely jealous and keeps a close watch on her, attacking any man who marries or intends to marry her. With a proper ritual appeasement, the best Ihuoma can be to any man, the *dibia* says, is a concubine but never a wife.

But Ekwueme's desperate attempt to marry Ihuoma knows no bounds. Hear him:

If marrying a woman like her is a fatal mistake I am prepared to make it. If I am her husband for a day before my death my soul will go singing happily to the spirit world (197).

And so Ekwueme's desperate parents seek alternative divination in far way Aliji and Agwoturumbe. The rather flamboyant *dibia* or medicine man assures them that the sea-king can be bound after all after an expensive and risky ritual which involves a midnight canoe ride to the middle of the sea. But the sea-king apparently does not wish to be appeased in this manner as he strikes on the eve of the planned marriage. While hunting for a red male lizard, the only item left for the midnight

ritual, Ihuoma's eldest son Nwonna's barbed arrow accidentally hits Ekwueme. He dies later leaving behind a completely broken-hearted Ihuoma, dejected parents and a bewildered community.

The novelist's artistic fidelity to the period he writes about is remarkable. The medium of monetary exchange, for example, is the manila. Not even the grandfather clock is seen here as characters tell time by cockcrows, the crying of cuckoos and the length of shadows:

I wonder how long the shadows are, he said, and went outside. He looked at his shadow and glanced at the sun. "The shadow of your head is like a coconut" Ihuoma said, smiling broadly. "With that Ojongo hair-do your shadow should be indescribable", Ekwueme retorted (108).

Ihuoma's complexion and age are determined from the village setting. Her complexion, for example, is "that of the anthill" and to calculate her age, the reader comes face to face with a piece of prehistoric experience that says much about the village life,

Every farm land was used once in seven years. The piece of land which her father farmed in the year of her birth was farmed for the fourth time last year, so she was just about twenty-two (14).

When the sun is setting, it is "going to Chiolu". Rain only falls after the clouds "had hung darkly over the shrine of Amadioha for several days in succession" (53). Since farmers depend on rain they keenly watch out for this sign. Nothing here like tape rule, meter or the kilometer for measurement for distance is measured either by finger or by the range of an arrow.

Recreated in *The Concubine* is a rural setting in which traditional African culture is explored. The people's very existence revolves around their communion with the gods, traditional marriages, hunting and sundry evening merriments. Omokachi village life, Elechi Amadi tells us

was noted for its tradition, propriety and decorum, excessive or fanatical feeling over anything were frowned upon and even described as crazy. Anyone who could not control his feelings was regarded as being unduly influenced by his agwu. Ayika later confirmed this as in Ahurole's case (165-166).

Amadi recreates a typical African society that is ruled by the gods. In fact according to Sam Adewoye (1996),

The people live their lives under the superintendence of the gods whose powers are based on traditional myths (77).

The gods are a powerful presence among the people. They are said to determine a person's destiny or fate. Amadioha, the god of thunder, for example, makes his appearance in the form of a snake. Emenike, Ihuoma's first husband dies because of the wrath of the sea-king to whom Ihuoma is said to be married.

Ihuoma's late husband apparently died of lock-chest but actually, it was all the design of the sea-king. As soon as Emenike married Ihuoma his life was forfeit and nothing would have saved him (195).

We saw the sea-king striking again in order to protect its own Ihuoma when Ekwueme dies through the arrow ironically, of Ihuoma's son.

The *dibia* (medicine men) are the messengers of the gods. They are viewed as sacred. Anyika and Agwoturunbe are examples in *The Concubine*. The unity between the people and the divinities can be seen in the way they seek them in virtually everything. Anyika, the *dibia*, is sent for when Emenike is down as a result of the fight he had with Madume, the greedy one. After some divinations, he talks to the gods and "administered the drugs and told them what materials they were to collect for sacrifice the next day" (7). Everybody, including Ihuoma is sure that Emenike will soon get better because Anyika has administered some drugs. This confidence is strengthened even more with the visit of Nwokekero, the priest of Amadioha the god of thunder.

In the absence of modern day hospitals the people relied on herbalists and nature for treatment. Whenever anyone was ill, a medicine man was first of all consulted to know whether there was a spiritual connection to the illness or not.

Superstition rules the people's life as no sickness is thought to occur without some spiritual connection. And when the medicine man arrived, the person consulting must pay something, preferably two manilas to him, before he proceeded in his business. Not to do this was to court the wrath of his personal god who was likely to render his medicine ineffective.

The economic activities of the people were simple: farming and hunting. The men hunted and grew yams while the women grew crops like cassava which they processed into garri

and “foo-foo” in order to feed the family. The people lived in traditional thatched houses. It was the work of the men to mend roofs with thatches and coils of rope.

As shown by Amadi, it is not all work for the people. They found time for recreation too. Wodu Wakiri, the wag, supplied endless jokes to enliven the atmosphere. Wrestling brought the people together in a spirit of true healthy competition. Elechi Amadi's genius is displayed in his picturesque description of a typical Oduma dance.

The men moved their backs and shoulder but the women moved only their waists and every bit of their energy seemed to be concentrated there. The vibrations were extremely rapid.

It was admirable how they maintained the rhythm at such high speed. For several seconds tension was at fever pitch. Then one by one the men straightened out and watched the women admirably. They danced so well. It was difficult to choose between them. Adiele belaboured the short high-pitch end of his Oduma, Nmam caressed the creasy edge of female drum with his hooked finger and the women nearly subbed with enthusiasm (27-28).

Like the traditional women in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, the women here were highly submissive to their husbands whom they regarded as ‘lords’. As shown by Amadi, the women here knew their place in the traditional society and so kept to it without complaining. For example, Wolu's objection to being used as a carrier of love messages to Ihuoma was not taken seriously by her husband, Madume. He simply shuts her up and told her that he would marry Ihuoma whether Wolu liked it or not.

In the absence of school, early marriage was a common phenomenon in Omokachi. Daughters were betrothed at early ages. Madume's daughter was being prepared for marriage at the age of fourteen. Ihuoma, the heroine of the novel got married at a very early age. Little wonder that at about twenty-two years of age she had given birth to three children. Ahurole was betrothed to Ekwueme when she was eight days old. All Ekwueme's father (Wigwe) did according to the tradition was merely to put some kolanuts and the shoots of young palm wine saplings into a vessel from which Ahurole drank.

Marriage negotiation was an ordeal as it

involved wine carrying, expensive bride price and entertaining guests. It was after the negotiation that the bride was eventually led to her husband's home. However, in spite of the involving ceremonies if the bride decided that she did not want to marry anymore, the bride price was returned to the groom's family. Ahurole's father, for example, was told to return the bride price because Ahurole had run away. Marriage proceedings in the case of a widow were, however, different. The main thing was the payment of the bride price to the family of the deceased husband. Palm wine was tendered and gifts exchanged. The people regarded marriage as a highly respected institution.

Also, realistically portrayed here is the celebrated traditional solidarity among the African people before the coming of westernization with its individualism and me-first philosophy. Here, the individual's existence outside the community is regarded as meaningless. The unity and neighbourliness that existed in Omokachi are so strong that a person's misfortune is borne by all. When Ekwueme ran into the bush, the Ikolo is soon sounded and virtually everybody gathered at the village arena to deliberate on how to search for the young man and in no time the young men under the direction of the elderly ones take to the bush to find Ekwueme. Ihuoma's constant loss of her husbands in inexplicable circumstances is shared by all in the village. Amadi is skilful not to wholly explain the various deaths in the novel through supernatural means. According to Sam Adewoye “he leaves behind the possibilities of social factors – from whether it is lock-chest, the result of working too hard in the rain or Amadioha that actually kills Emenike.

As hinted at earlier, Omokachi's very existence is shrouded in several myths and superstitions like a typical African village before the advent of the colonialists. The people believed fervently in Ojukwu, who they said controlled smallpox. This disease is so dreaded by the people that nobody dared call its name; they simply called it the “good thing”. When a victim of smallpox died no one dared weep. People merely said mildly that the “good thing” had claimed him. People went to bed early and would never sing at night or wave a fire brand. It is believed that the god could come in the shape of a woman and ask a neighbour for

vegetable to make her soup. Refusal to grant her the said vegetable could mean catching the disease. This made people a bit nicer during epidemics. The sacred bird of Ojukwu was said to be the vulture and if one settled on a man's roof he ran immediately to a medicine man to divine the message from the god. The findings could be anything from blood curdling ultimatum to a good will message and sacrifices to appease the god varied accordingly.

Amadi's realism is seen in skillful organization and control of language in *The Concubine*. So also is his handling of the description of village life and the relationship between man and god which according to Oladele Taiwo is so successfully done "that the reader is hardly tempted to think of his book in terms of sociological data" (1982:197). Amadi does not idealize the society he presents in this novel neither does he allow place for undue sentiments. Individual and communal defects are hardly glossed over to score a cheap sociological point. In the village are good people like Ihuoma and Nnadi, clowns like Wakiri, bullies like the big-eyed Madume and Nman. Amadi regards his characters as rational human beings who are capable of love and hate, friendliness and even conceit just like every other normal person in the society.

THE GREAT PONDS

If *The Concubine* deals with the problems of young love and man's relationship with gods and their uncanny ways, *The Great Ponds* (1970) focuses its attention on intertribal warfare. The novel is a recreation of a seemingly simple domestic conflict between two villages that later snowballs into a war of attrition. The cause of the conflict was the pond at Wagaba which the two villages, Chiolu and Aliakoro claimed to have right to fish in.

Eze Diali, the ruler of Chiolu tribe summoned a meeting of the elders and the able bodied men of Chiolu on the grounds that poachers always came at night from the neighbouring villages of Aliakoro, to fish secretly on the pond of Wagaba which they laid claim to since they fished in it openly and at any time. At the meeting, decisions on how to catch the poachers from Aliakoro village were made. Olumba, the redoubtable warrior was saddled with the job of choosing six men to

confront the poaching challenge from Aliakoro. As soon as his choice was sanctioned, the meeting came to an end and the men went home to prepare for the great task ahead.

As soon as Olumba and his men arrived at the pond, they hid and waited patiently for the poachers who, predictably, came to the pond to fish. Among the poachers from Aliakoro was Wago, the leopard killer. There was a frantic struggle and fight. Chiolu's men, however, succeeded in capturing three Aliakoro men among whom was Wago himself. One managed to escape. As the captives were being led to Chiolu, Wago escaped.

Eze Diali and the elders were highly impressed by the outcome of events. Aliakoro sent delegates to Chiolu to plead to release the captive of war. Eze Diali however, promised to release the prisoners on one condition which was that the ruler of Aliakoro should pay a huge sum of money as ransom. When Eze Okechi got the message from Chiolu, he and his elders decided to send the elder to Chiolu for a meeting. Among the delegates was the leopard killer himself, Wago. The decision reached at the end was war and the villages dispersed in preparation for war.

The warriors of Aliakoro led by Wago were the first to launch attack on Chiolu. The war was fought and at the end Chiolu was victorious over Aliakoro but with stubborn Wago still alive all was not well yet. True to prediction, Aliakoro launched another attack with an allied tribe and their leaders, angered by the turn of events, vowed not to leave Chiolu without a booty or spoil. A kidnap was arranged between the allied tribe and Aliakoro. In the night, unknown to Chiolu three women, among them were Oda, Olumba's wife and Chisa, Eze Diali's daughter were kidnapped. Chiolu did not take this kindly but it treated the event carefully in order to get the women back alive.

Eze Okechi of Aliakoro village saw an ominous sign - two flightless birds caught by his son. A *dibia* was consulted. He warned the Eze to return the women. This was, however, impossible as the allied tribe had sold two of the three women into slavery. So, to prove that the controversial pond belonged to Chiolu, Olumba swore by the dreaded god, Ogbunabali, the god of the night. The condition was that if Olumba died before the end of six months, Aliakoro would claim the

pond. Chiolu, therefore, guided, guarded and protected Olumba.

Inspired by Wago, Aliakoro looked for diabolic means to destroy Olumba so that they could claim the pond. Olumba deteriorated, physically and mentally. It was at this stage that Wonjo crashed in on the two warring villages. Meanwhile, Olumba lingered on. The final attempt to kill Olumba by Wago failed and the latter committed the greatest form of crime by committing suicide in the pond of Wagaba thus ruining the chances of the tribes ever fishing in the pond.

Like in *The Concubine*, Amadi cleverly works into the fabric of the story in *The Great Ponds* the culture and traditional beliefs of the Ikwere people before the coming of westernization. The people lived in huts made of clay and sand covered with grasses as roof. In each hut lived family/families comprising the father, mother, children and sometimes the husband's father. The few wealthy ones owned as many as three huts.

The people were hunters and mainly fishermen. Chiolu, for example, had many ponds where the people fished. At the beginning of the narrative, Olumba is seen mending some fish traps. Considering the role of fishing as an occupation of the people the pond of Wagaba therefore becomes a criterion for their existence. Little wonder the two villages stake all in their bid to prove their ownership of the controversial pond. Many critics believe that the ponds of Wagaba, the apple of discord between the two supposedly neighbouring villages are no ordinary ponds. According to Adewoye (1996:82), there is "something mythical about the physical appearance of the ponds in the novel-something bordering on animism". Ebele Eko has remarked that as the great ponds are restless with fish so are the villages restless with ambition, envy, pride and all kinds of narrow-minded sentiments that facilitate the start of destructive wars. These critics' analyses of the great ponds are no doubt substantiated by the strange and rather mysterious way Amadi himself presents them in the novel.

During the raining season the great ponds formed one mysterious stagnant sea of reddish brown water ranging in depth from the waist to four or more times the height of man... During the dry season the floods subsided. What water was left collected in individual ponds restless

with fish linked to one another by narrow necks of water (11).

Like in *The Great Ponds*, first in this hierarchy of supernatural deities is the dreaded Ogbunabali, the god of the night. According to Niyi Osundare (1980:107), Ogbunabali "is regarded by the people as the bastion of morality and the ultimate arbiter of justice". Indeed, the local people offer sacrifices to Ogbunabali and invoke him at difficult moments. Olumba, for example, prays to the god to save his wife who is on the verge of death. With the reverence the people have for the intimidating god, one is a little surprised that they invoke him to help settle the ownership of the ponds, once and for all. At the end of the narrative the people (like us the readers) are none the wiser as regards the true owner of the ponds. Are we to take Olumba's survival as an indication of Chiolu's claim to the ponds? Again, where is the dreaded god as Wago tries desperately to kill Olumba to prove Aliakoro's ownership of the controversial ponds especially since the priest of the god has invoked him to kill anybody who might want to harm or kill Olumba? Hasn't Wonjo come to "out god him? (1980: 108) Hasn't the god actually failed to function as "affirmer of secular ethos?" (Soyinka 1975: 95). Has the god not betrayed the people at their greatest hour of need?

Certainly Amadi's treatment of Ogbunabali leaves more questions than answers. Perhaps it is as well, for a god would not be a god if he is not uncanny and incomprehensible to puny mortals. Although Ogbunabali may seem more terrestrial and secular than the proud, ostentatious and sadistic sea-king in its watery remoteness in *The Concubine*, yet a god is a god: uncanny, incomprehensible and unpredictable.

If Ogbunabali is a god of the night, Ani is the god of the earth. Apart from these two gods, the local people worship other gods and ancestors. In ministering to these supernatural deities, libations, sacrifices and offerings are involved. Gin is used and divination is preceded by offering kolanuts to appease the gods. The people also believe in charms and talismans. In fact, according to Adewoye (1996: 83), "the world of the characters is a world of sacrifice to numerous gods, the world of charms worn on vital parts of the body". Indeed, Olumba testified with pride to the efficacy of his talisman.

This talisman round my neck is his handwork; it is for protection and luck while traveling. In times of danger, I simply vanish. The first day I wore it to the forest a leopard passed by me within two paces, I went on my way unharmed (10).

Sundry proverbs and proverbial utterances characteristic of typical African rural environment abound in *The Great Ponds*. Eze Diali's speech, for example, is laced with proverbs.

Valour that is not tempered with wisdom is useless and even dangerous ... Pepper cannot be one of the ingredients for a soothing balm (15).

Well demonstrated in *The Great Ponds* is the claim of the group over the individual, a common feature of Igbo tradition. In this context a man's success is not only for himself and family but for the whole group. When a man commits a crime or errs, the whole society condemns him. Many parents pray for good children that will serve the community selflessly. In a sense, the individual is artistically meaningless without the community. This claim of the group over individual is creatively portrayed by Amadi through the exploits of war between Chiolu and Aliakoro. Three major characters are evident here: Wago, the leopard killer and consummate Machiavellian, Olumba, the impulsive patriot and Okechi.

Right from the very beginning of the novel, Olumba is portrayed as a valiant warrior fully dedicated to the services of his village, Chiolu. During the war between Chiolu and Aliakoro he fought fearlessly and stuck his neck out by taking an oath to prove that the controversial ponds belonged to Chiolu. This was a big risk that involved not his life alone but that of his entire family even though there was hardly any concrete proof that the ponds belonged to Chiolu. Olumba's health and safety became public property after the oath as everybody in Chiolu sympathized with him and feared for his health afterwards. To save Olumba from danger, Ikechi was assigned to take care of some of his chores like palm wine tapping and farming. Ikechi was overwhelmed with the anxiety in his services to his village. This anxiety made him think little of his own personal safety. He was very impulsive and reckless. He was quite ready and willing to take part in the fight between Chiolu and Aliakoro. Since his acceptance into adult life within the society

depended on his success in the war, he was ready to fight. His father, Njola was patriotic. He encouraged his son, albeit indirectly, to fight for the course of the village. He told Olumba,

Olumba, it is far better to have no son at all than to have one who is of no use to the village particularly at a time like this (30).

In his book *Ethics in Nigerian Culture* (1982), Amadi claims that he is just "a simple story-teller". Indeed, he is not only a simple story-teller but actually a fascinating one too who celebrates the typical way of life of the Africans as represented here by the Ikwere people. Celebrated here is pristine innocence of the traditional people before the rampaging forces of colonialism.

As can be seen from a study of the two novels, it was not when the European colonialists came that Africans heard of culture for the first time. Africans had always had their own ways of life before the intrusion of colonialism. As Amadi shows, the traditional way of life was defined by the co-existence of the supernatural deities and man. As a matter of fact, in the people's cosmology it is the gods who define the destiny of all. Superstition, omens, and symbolism rule the people's way of life. A sense of mystery and the mysterious pervade everywhere. Charms and talismans are used to ward off malevolent forces. Artistically portrayed here is the unhurrying movement of a typical village. The narrative is relaxed, almost leisurely.

As a realistic writer, Amadi does not idealize or romanticize the traditional society recreated in his novel. In fact his mode of characterization indicates a wide range of human types with differing shades of moral dispositions. Like, in every society, the good, the bad and the ugly exist in Amadi's fictive world. Adewoye puts it even more succinctly,

What Amadi does is to reaffirm the authenticity and originality of the African's culture belief. This gives his novels an artistic immediacy and closeness to the people of their culture from which they are inadvertently distancing themselves.

Chinua Achebe has repeatedly stated that only Africans can tell their own story better. By recreating the traditional way of life of the African people before the coming of the colonizing powers, Amadi as an African has no doubt helped to tell the African story.

AMADI AND THE NOTION OF ARTISTIC COMMITMENT

Geoffrey Finch has described Amadi as “the most modern of all Nigerian novelists” insisting that “the strength of his work lies precisely in its being less socially and politically relevant than that of Achebe and Soyinka” (1975: 5). But one is tempted to ask whether his deliberate avoidance of artistic immediacy is indeed a virtue given the fact that today, many critics are urging African novelists not only to deal with the pressing issues of the moment but also to point the way forward in the continent to demonstrate their unflagging commitment to their nations and race. No one would deny today that Africa as a continent is bedeviled by manifold problems from leadership incompetence, destructive wars to political chicanery and corruption. The African novel has since moved from mere artistic portrayal to the search for an enduring solution to the continent’s problems. In view of the preoccupation of Amadi’s novels can we still refer to him as a committed writer? By commitment here is meant the social, moral or even political purpose of Amadi’s art. Has Amadi’s art any social, cultural or political relevance? Which cause is it dedicated to? These questions are no doubt pertinent: Amadi is from a continent whose art, be it literary or otherwise is characterized basically by a repudiation of the nineteenth century European aesthetic doctrine that “art is self sufficient and need serve no moral or political purpose” (Drabble and Stringer 2007: 29).

In a paper presented at the University of Calabar in 1979 entitled “The Problem of Commitment in Literature” Elechi Amadi stated that while “the commitment is necessary... the question is whether the effect of commitment on literary quality is salutary” (3).

For many critics whose definition of artistic relevance is synonymous with a passionate concern with the matter of the moment, Amadi says that quite often the literature of commitment depends for its success on matters of the moment “but that we must recognize the paradox that the more immediately relevant to society a work of art is, the more quickly it becomes irrelevant” (8). True, Amadi has maintained his artistic independence by setting all his novels in the past “at a time when the smooth surface of traditional village life had

not been rippled by the wash of any colonial boat carrying new ideas” (Sweeney 1986:113). Many critics have even compared his seeming indifference to the lure of immediacy (at least in his novels) to writers like Marcel Proust and James Joyce. “To have resisted the pressure of immediacy” says Sweeney, is itself “a feat requiring a great deal of confidence in his own artistic vision” (113).

EDUCATION AND RE-EDUCATION

Amadi may have decided to keep away from immediate societal pressures in order to keep his integrity as a skillful story teller. But this does not detract from his own commitment as a novelist, which to my mind, is of an entirely different hue. Rather than attack foreign religions directly, for example, Amadi relates his own strategy:

I adopted another approach in my two novels. I do not even mention the foreign gods. I ignore them utterly, concentrating only on our ancestral gods. And showing them as powerful and as influential as the Christian deity (1974: 4).

Again, by setting his novels in the past, Amadi shows us the cohesive relationship of Africans before the rampaging forces set in. In a way, Africans are given a reflection of things before the “rains started beating them” as a people. Anybody who has never known where he is coming from is not likely to know where he is going. Who has ever taken solace in a crab like movement? In a sense Amadi’s contention is to

re-educate (his) own people and to bring them back to a sense of their own value and dignity; a sense badly shaken and shattered in a painful process of denigration (Sweeney 1986:116).

Amadi’s work equally serves to educate the colonizers, disabuse their minds of abysmal ignorance and to help them realize, according to Achebe (1973:8), that,

African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans, that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry, and above all, they had dignity.

This function of correctly educating non-Africans about her people’s way of life is in-

deed an essential one. This is because even before the colonial era Africa as a continent had been misrepresented in both Europe and America. Ronald Dathorne tells us that in the early twentieth century literature of the West Indies, Africa was regarded as “an essential study in primitivism” (1965: 97). Similarly, Africa, Michael Furray states, was regarded as a “land of errors and Egyptian gloom” (1969: 35). In fact, most of the so called novels written between 1874 and 1939 were characterized by a stock image of Africa. According to G.D Killam “they convey the general belief that African society, religious and political institutions are naïve, and that this primitiveness justifies the presence of the white man” (1968: XI).

CONCLUSION

This paper has all along preoccupied itself with an in-depth exploration of the cultural experience of the Africans before the coming of the devastating forces of colonialism. It has also examined the complexion of Elechi Amadi’s artistic commitment which is located in the need to educate and re-educate Africans and foreigners in his self imposed literary burden to wipe out age old misconceptions about the African continent.

Elechi Amadi is not alone in this duty of education and re-education. In fact, in his early novels, Achebe’s literary objective had been education of both black and white. Like Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, especially the first section of the three sections which make up the novel, Camera Laye’s *The African Child*, becomes a cultural document of a sort portraying traditional African life which he describes as almost Edenic in its complete harmony with nature. In this novel, Laye depicts the unity of African culture. It plunges into Manlike land in Guinea, unmasking the mysteries of the narrator’s childhood, his family life, his schooling, his relationship with his extended family, his initiation and circumcision and other cultural phenomena of the Manlike society. Camera Laye’s cultural alienation begins when he departs for France.

Its obvious artistic weakness notwithstanding, Laye’s *The African Child* has been regarded by literary critics as a case study in cultural

nationalism. It is a cultural crusade detailing and idealizing the peculiarity of Manlike culture and that of Africa in general. It is a veritable tale told in fresh, poetic, simple and soothing style with an overriding theme of cultural nationalism.

Towards the end of *The Great Ponds*, “wonjo”, like a deus-ex-machina crashes in on the people of Chiolu and Aliakoro and their gods. “Wonjo” indeed seems to have overpowered the great Ogbunabali himself and makes mincemeat of the life and ways of the people. Amadi says that “Wonjo” was none other than the great influenza of 1918 which claimed about twenty million people. “Wonjo” by this implication, therefore, becomes a symbol of great devastation that was to come to the people and their relatively settled way of life. Indeed, a greater “Wonjo” in the form of colonialism was later to drastically change the traditional people and their way of life.

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