



# The Portrayal of Missionaries in African Literature

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CHRISTIANITY IS OFTEN REGARDED AMBIVALENTLY BY AFRICANS. ON THE ONE hand, some missionaries are or were highly regarded for challenging the discriminatory policies of the white settler governments that justified colonialism as a civilizing mission.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, some Africans regard(ed) missionaries as the spiritual arm of imperialism, complementing the secular arm symbolized by the District Commissioner. Both sides have some validity, and it is therefore of vital importance to anchor the debate firmly within an appropriate historical context in order to make a judicious assessment.

In this essay I shall concentrate on the manner in which Christianity, missionary endeavors, and religious strife have been presented in the works of some major writers from West Africa, East Africa, and Southern Africa. Specifically, I shall discuss in some detail the way in which Chinua Achebe, the distinguished Nigerian author, and Mongo Beti, the highly acclaimed Cameroonian satirist, handle

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, J. Guy, *The Heretic: A Study of the Life of John William Colenso 1814-1883* (Pietermaritzburg/Johannesburg: University of Natal Press/Ravan, 1983).

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*Christianity and Christian missionaries are regarded ambivalently by Africans. African literature presents missionaries sometimes sympathetically, sometimes not at all so. Such literature lets the church see itself through other eyes and helps it determine ways to model its ministry after Christ himself.*

these themes. I will refer more briefly to the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiongo, Ezekiel Mphahlele from South Africa, and Zimbabwe's Stanlake Samkange.

### I. CHINUA ACHEBE, *THINGS FALL APART*

It is appropriate to start with Chinua Achebe who is widely regarded as the "father" of the modern African novel. In his classic, *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe charts the fundamental changes that took place in Africa with the advent of imperial penetration. *Things Fall Apart* specifically challenges the European stereotype of Africa as a primitive continent inhabited by benighted natives, so graphically recorded in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe described his mission in an article, "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation":

The fundamental theme...is 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. It is this dignity that many African people all but lost during the colonial period and it is this that they must now regain. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms, what they lost.<sup>2</sup>

It is therefore not surprising to note that one of Achebe's major themes in *Things Fall Apart* is the conflict between African traditional religion, symbolized by Igbo beliefs, and Christianity. Achebe highlights the strengths and weaknesses of both religions. Indeed one of the reasons he is regarded as one of Africa's foremost writers is his evenhandedness. As he himself put it:

We cannot pretend that our past was one long technicolour idyll. We have to admit that like other people's past ours had its good as well its bad sides....I maintain that any serious African who wants to plead the cause of the past must not only be God's advocate, he must also do duty for the devil.<sup>3</sup>

The essential decency of the Umuofian society is clearly articulated in the evocation of the lives of the major characters in Achebe's book. One pivotal weakness of that culture, however, is its harsh treatment of those who do not fit into the basic framework, symbolized by its rejection at birth of twins and throughout their lives of *osu* (outcasts from the clan). This is the structural weakness that Christianity is able to exploit.

Achebe presents two models of missionary endeavors. The first is Mr. Brown, who establishes a toe-hold in the clan by ministering to its outcasts. This strikes a chord in sensitive souls, like that of Nwoye:

But there was a young lad who had been captivated. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son. It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion. Something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed

<sup>2</sup>Chinua Achebe, "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation," in *African Writers on African Writing*, ed. G. D. Killam (London: Heinemann, 1978) 8.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 9.

to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul—the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like drops of frozen rain melting on the dry plate of the panting earth. Nwoye's callow mind was greatly puzzled.<sup>4</sup>

The poetic nature of Achebe's imagery bears eloquent testimony to the manner in which Christianity has taken root in parts of Africa. The new religious dispensation met the spiritual needs of converts who were disillusioned with their community's beliefs. This success owes much to the sensitivity of missionaries like Mr. Brown to their converts' culture. Mr. Brown lived among the Igbo and learned from them. He respected their culture, learned their language, and ministered to their specific needs or situation.

His successor Rev. J. Smith typifies the worst elements of fundamentalist zeal. Achebe cleverly allows this priest to condemn himself by his narrow and dishonest interpretation of the scriptures:

Mr Brown's successor was the Reverend James Smith, and he was a different kind of man. He condemned openly Mr Brown's policy of compromise and accommodation. He saw things as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness. He spoke in his sermons about sheep and goats and about wheat and tares. He believed in slaying the prophets of Baal.

Mr Smith was greatly distressed by the ignorance which many of his flock showed even in such things as the Trinity and the Sacraments. It only showed that they were seeds sown on rocky soil. Mr Brown had thought of nothing but numbers. He should have known that the kingdom of God did not depend on large crowds. Our Lord himself had stressed the importance of fewness. Narrow is the way and few the number. To fill the Lord's holy temple with an idolatrous crowd clamouring for signs was a folly of everlasting consequence. Our Lord used the whip only once in His life—to drive the crowd away from His church.<sup>5</sup>

Mr. Brown's liberal perspective of starting from where his congregation is is imperiously swept aside by the sanctimonious assurance of the "elect." The perception of mission as a two-way process is replaced by a top-down model.

## II. MONGO BETI, *THE POOR CHRIST OF BOMBA*

The most scathing attacks on missionary activities in African literature tend to focus on the spiritual chauvinism that afflicts certain kinds of missionaries. Those who, like Bishop John William Colenso (Bishop of Natal, South Africa, 1855), respected some of the philosophies that underpinned the social structures of their flock, were in turn respected by the host communities, traditionalists and converts alike. Those who came convinced that they had nothing to learn and everything to give were and are the ones singled out for biting criticism. The most hilarious example of a pig-headed missionary is perhaps Mongo Beti's Father Drumont, in *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, to whom we are introduced thus:

<sup>4</sup>Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958; reprint, Harare: Zimbabwe Educational Books, 1987) 103-4.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 130.

Surely it isn't any blasphemy...oh, no! It even fills me with joy to think that perhaps it was Providence, the Holy Ghost himself, who whispered this advice in the Father's ear, 'Tell them that Jesus and the Reverend Father are all one.' Especially when our village children, looking at the picture of Christ surrounded by boys, were astonished at his likeness to our Father. Same beard, same soutane, same cord around the waist. And they cried out, 'But, Jesus Christ is just like the Father!' And the Father assured them that Christ and himself were one. And since then all the boys of my village call the Father 'Jesus Christ'.

Jesus Christ! Oh, I am sure it's no blasphemy! He really deserves that name, that simple praise from innocent hearts. A man who has really spread faith among us; made good Christians every day, often despite themselves. A man full of authority. A stern man. A father—Jesus Christ!<sup>6</sup>

Beti uses a naive narrator, Denis, whose witless adoration of his idol, Father Drumont, enables the author to present a devastating exposé of spiritual smugness as epitomized by the Reverend Father.

Unlike Mr. Brown, Fr. Drumont cannot speak his parishioners' language—in fact the joke is that they can only decipher what he said the following day! Though making much of his likeness to Christ, itself a reflection of eurocentric portrayals of Jesus, Fr. Drumont is quite unchristlike: he despises children, is a misogynist, and is largely insensitive to the plight of the blacks who are laboring under the yoke of colonialism. His utter self-assurance, linked to his authoritarianism, blinds him to the reality of what is going on in his mission. Albeit that he builds, through his relentless exploitation of female labor under the guise of training them to be good Christian wives, a beautiful town in Bomba, it is finally abandoned because of the corruption it signifies. As Professor Blair summed it up:

Drumont was completely unaware that his *Sixa* has become a brothel, that his catechists are pimps, his African staff corrupt opportunists, his converts simply fugitives from forced labor.<sup>7</sup>

Fr. Drumont's downfall reflects his inability to see the forest for the trees as he himself states during his moment of epiphany:

I left France with all the ardour of an Apostle. I had only one notion in my head and one ambition in my heart: to extend the Kingdom of Christ. Rationalist Europe, so full of arrogance, science and self-consciousness, filled me with dismay. I chose the disinherited, or those whom I was pleased to regard as such. How naive I was; for are we not ourselves the truly disinherited?...When I arrived here twenty years ago, Christ was not wholly unknown in this country. The German missionaries had been here before us, and I found a population attentive and compliant almost to the point of obsequiousness. I abandoned myself to proselytism, never pausing to question my activities. I interpreted their attention as the hunger for Christ and their compliance as a proof that they had found Him. I never stopped to think that I was in a colonized country, or that subjugated people might have special characteristics. I found myself amongst men who obeyed the slightest motion of my little finger. I played the aristocrat, throwing them orders which they instantly obeyed. I built schools, churches, houses, almost a whole town at the Catholic Mission to Bomba. I didn't even ask

<sup>6</sup>Mongo Beti, *The Poor Christ of Bomba* (London: Heinemann, 1985) 3.

<sup>7</sup>D. S. Blair, *African Literature in French: A History of Creative Writing in French from West and Equatorial Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1976) 210.

myself what all this display had to do with Christ. In a word, I became an administrator like you, Monsieur Vidal. Yes, exactly like you! This lasted a long while. It might have lasted even longer, if I hadn't suddenly noticed among them a sort of...*volte face*. I was vexed, I stormed at them, but it made not the slightest difference. They simply weren't the same people any more. I didn't recognize them. And I didn't realise that they had spotted me, that they'd judged me and decided that I had all along deceived them.<sup>8</sup>

Fr. Superior Drumont's fixation with external things—buildings, outward signs of veneration, and his obsession with cult dues, despite the dire poverty or domestic circumstances of some of the members of his flock, led to his loss of prestige. As the Ziba catechist put it:

It's really terrible. No one is interested any more, except women. Only the women have religion in their blood; the men are completely indifferent. They claim there is no difference between a Greek trader and a priest, even one like Father Drumont. And for evidence, they point to the wealth of the Catholic missions, all the presents which the Father collects and all the cult dues. They say the Father is as greedy as a tax-collector as the Administrator.<sup>9</sup>

Fr. Drumont comes to realize that his mission is damned by association with white imperialism:

Wasn't their adherence to Christianity, a formal adherence at that, simply a defence mechanism; just like that little animal. — What is it called?...The chameleon, which takes the colour of its surroundings to avoid being hunted? Oh! Monsieur Vidal, you don't know these people yet. It's very hard to understand them, as it must be with all oppressed people. Their reactions may strike you as strange at first. They don't stand firm in the place of violence, like the oak tree of La Fontaine, no! They bend, as their experience has taught them to bend. And my roadside Christians bend in becoming Christian for the sake of form. Oh! They aren't fools. They noticed long ago the tone of deference and superstitious respect with which you colonials speak of missionaries and all religious matters, even though you don't practise your faith for an instant. All the formal aspects of religion are presented to them: its prayers, its genuflections, its signs of the cross and incantations and saints and crucifixes. What an instrument for the revenge of their outraged humanity! "See how at ease we are with your own deepest mysteries! Why then do you persist in despising us?"<sup>10</sup>

Fr. Drumont grapples with the humanity of the black victims for the first time. He struggles with the realization that their outlook must be taken into account, rather than ignored, as he lives out his fantasies. He has to encounter people as people, not as objects that can be manipulated whimsically.

### III. SAMKANGE, MPHABLELE, AND WA THIONGO

This sense of cultural chauvinism appears also in Stanlake Samkange's *The Mourned One*. Though he is a son of the manse, Samkange's novel is nevertheless a powerful indictment of the Methodist Church in Rhodesia, which was a District of the

<sup>8</sup>Beti, *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, 153-4.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 97.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 155.

British Conference. The segregation at Waddilove Mission reflects how the formal structures on church ground mirrored the larger divisions in colonial Rhodesia.<sup>11</sup>

How can the Christian message of the brotherhood and sisterhood of all humankind be mediated honestly in a deeply segregated environment? This is a challenge that affects the American churches today. The perception of missionaries as hypocrites stems from such divisions. In Ezekiel Mphahlele's autobiography, *Down Second Avenue*, the Anglican Church is presented as being more interested in "church shillings" than in fighting on behalf of the oppressed.<sup>12</sup> The prophetic mission which celebrates Yahweh as the champion of justice is ignored in favor of the equivocation: "Render to Caesar that which is due to Caesar and to God what is due to God." The dismissal of Christians as mealy-mouthed, unprincipled people stems from the selective nature of the churches' mission—the message that offers "pie in the sky when you die," rather than attempting to address people's material condition.

Ngugi wa Thiongo's quarrel with Christianity rests on this. His later novels, *Devil on the Cross*, *Petals of Blood*, and *Matigari*, are virulent attacks on the ecclesiastical brand of neo-colonialism: the rise of evangelical sects preaching the gospel of prosperity, all the while fleecing the members!<sup>13</sup> In his earlier works, however, Ngugi did try to synthesize African traditional religion and Christianity. This is seen in *The River Between*, which traces the confluence between Christian and Gikuyu creation myths. The death of Muthoni, who has been circumcised against the wishes of her father, suggests that syncretism cannot work.<sup>14</sup> In Ngugi's finest novel, *A Grain of Wheat*, the Christian cycle of death and resurrection is used to show the price that must be paid in order to secure national liberation. The guerrilla leader Kihika is presented as a Black Moses leading his people out of Egypt into Canaan.<sup>15</sup>

From the examples cited above, it is evident that Christianity has had a significant impact on the development of African literature. Many of the writers studied initially at mission schools, where religious instruction figured prominently. It is thus not surprising to find that missionary activity is an important theme in their writing. The attitudes to missionary endeavors vary in line with the experiences of the given author and communities, as one would expect. Some writers like Chinua Achebe pay homage to sensitive missionaries who respected different spiritual perspectives, while others like Mongo Beti heap scorn on arrogant and callous priests who despised the communities they purported to serve. The challenge to those missionaries still in the field is to discover how to minister along the lines set out by Christ himself, who showed sensitivity to the needs of the people he served. ⊕

<sup>11</sup>Stanlake Samkange, *The Mourned One* (London: Heinemann, 1975).

<sup>12</sup>Ezekiel Mphahlele, *Down Second Avenue* (Harare: ZPH, 1982).

<sup>13</sup>Ngugi wa Thiongo, *Devil on the Cross* (London: Heinemann, 1982); *Petals of Blood* (London, Heinemann, 1977); *Matigari* (London: Heinemann, 1989).

<sup>14</sup>Ngugi wa Thiongo, *The River Between* (Harare: ZPH, 1990).

<sup>15</sup>Ngugi wa Thiongo, *A Grain of Wheat* (London: Heinemann, 1976).