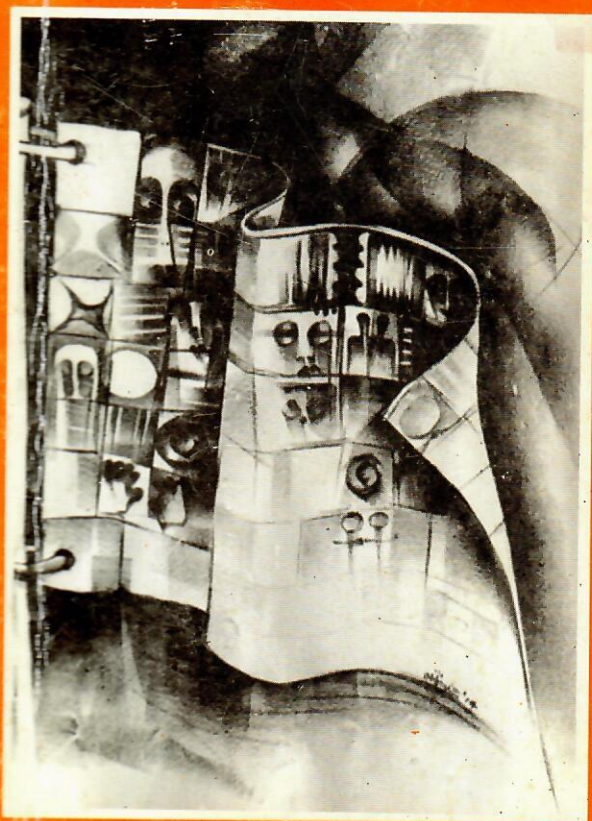




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Literature and Religious Discourse in West Africa

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Abstract

Religion has always impacted on the production and content of literature. In West Africa, most discussions on literature revolve around writing that emerged from the colonial experience, and therefore, takes into account the presence and effect of Christianity on society. However, this privileging of a specific period has inhibited the study of the significant impact Islam has had on literary production in this region. By focusing on the dynamics between Islam and literature, the following examines the marginalization of 'other' cultural influences and experiences. It analyses factors that drive canon formation in West African literature and also critical reactions that determine the survival of literary texts.

Introduction

The general impression conveyed by literary criticism of West African literature is one of a cultural activity that is largely a synthesis of Western literary ideals and indigenous African oral traditions. In fact, for a long time 'literary texts' referred to writing that belonged strictly to the Western canon. It is only the



recent inclusion of postcolonial literature, that is, those texts that analyse and respond to the cultural legacies of colonialism that has brought about an expansion in the range of literature available for critical study. However, West African writers have created a vibrant modern body of literary works but from the multiplicity of voices that have emerged some are less audible than others as they encounter some unexpected barriers in their attempts to represent their particular perspectives and experiences. The various writers come from specific societies in sub-Saharan Africa with historical and sociological peculiarities and for that reason, reflect vastly different worlds. Nonetheless, the literary establishment appears to take for granted the absence of a large section of West African society. Yet in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of West African literature, it is important to question this gap, in particular, to examine the critical silence that surrounds some of the narratives that have an Islamic subtext. As Bangura (2000) observes, a deeply ingrained pattern of prejudice towards the presence of Islam in European language writing in West Africa has led to a serious misreading of many novels from this area. These misconceptions originate from a discourse of colonial literature that springs out of the orientalist tradition of Western scholarship. The following attempts to analyse the dynamics between European inspired literary ideas and non-Western cultures by exploring the relationship between literary discourse and the Islamic religion taking into particular consideration the output of two literary powerhouses in West Africa, Nigeria and Senegal. In addition it examines how this impinges on the critical reception of certain texts and the formation of canons.

Some Western critics such as Booker (1998) claim that most African languages did not have written forms and that the 'very

act of writing is to a certain extent a European activity' (28), thereby linking the acquisition of writing skills by Africans to the era of European colonization. The existence of Egyptian hieroglyphics long before the emergence of written cultures in Europe is briefly acknowledged, but like many other critics, Booker ignores the presence of several centuries of writing in Arabic script that in areas outside North Africa that predate European colonialism. Numerous critical discussions on West African literature (Jeyifo 1985; Cooper 1992; Losambe 2004; Eze 2011) tend to begin with writing that emerged from the colonial experience and that is written in the languages of the West, English or French. They focus mainly on the social and psychological ruptures that colonialism inflicted on the African world but these analyses have a tendency of treating African literature as if it is a homogenous product. Furthermore, they generally take into consideration the impact of the Christian religion which accompanied European colonialism consequently leading to the privileging of a particular period of West African literary history. This then deters the in-depth study of other cultural influences that also affect literary production especially in terms of who writes, what they write about, and their place in the field of literature.

West African literature in various forms – poetry, drama, and the novel, as well as the critical discourse that accompanies it has been largely preoccupied with the combined impact of colonialism and Christianity on West African people and society. These twin forces appear to exert a powerful pull on the creative imagination starting with writers of the first generation such as Chinua Achebe in his classical novels *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, Mongo Beti in *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, Ferdinand Oyono in *The Houseboy* to the plays of Wole Soyinka such as *The*



Road with its use of the Christian imagery of crucifixion to the poetry of Leopold Senghor and others of the Negritude movement. Most wrote in reaction to the social and political disruptions caused by British and French rule and also of the impact of Christian missionary activities such as when David Diop protests about 'When civilization kicked us in the face, when holy water slapped our brows'. Recent literary contributions such as Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* are continuations on the same theme.

For most writers, the tendency has been to represent the presence of Christianity primarily in terms of its contribution to the crises of identity and its effects on the cohesion of society. Ironically, the themes, imagery and structures of their texts are nonetheless deeply influenced by Euro-Christian literary traditions (Irele 1990; Nnolim 1992). This influence has similarly seeped into critical discussions which in turn have resulted in the canonization of certain texts which reflect the aesthetic practices and values of the West. On the other hand, with the rare exception of Kenneth Harrow's seminal text *Faces of Islam in West African Literature* (1991) and his other contributions, critical discourse on the impact of Islam on what is written in West Africa, why it is written, and how it is produced has been slow and muted. The reasons for this can be traced to a number of factors which include the nature of Islamic literacy in West Africa and the characteristics of the religion as they affect modern literature.

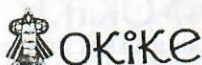
Islam and Literature in West Africa

Although it is not always emphasized by scholars trained in Western-style schools, literacy was introduced into West Africa in two distinct waves through the agency of people who hailed



from different parts of the world but who nevertheless came with similar objectives of trade and the propagation of religions new to the region. The first to arrive were the agents of Islam whose impact on the cultural life of West Africa was felt as far back as the 11th century. Initially the religion was more a court affair than a popular movement and the development of literacy in Arabic was elitist as it first spread through the ranks of the ruling class. But by the end of the 15th century, a tradition of writing in Arabic had been established (Hiskett 984). Literacy was acquired in Islamic religious schools and when early West African Muslim scholars came to write, they focused primarily on penning essays on theology, law, and ethics. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, during the prolific period of the Islamic reformer Shehu Usman dan Fodio, the emphasis of writing by Muslims was on the pragmatic and the political. Being mainly religious scholars, the literate class that was not favourably inclined towards folk arts or to be specific the writing of creative verses and adjoined those who practised such pastimes to desist in the following manner:

Singer stop, do not waste your time
 In singing the praises of mortal men
 Sing the praises of the Prophet,
 That you may have comfort.
 It is midih
 hat you should hold fast,
 That you may obtain your desire,
 And those who have eloquence,
 Let them come and explain it by commentary
 By speaking even to the Prophet's qualities. (Hiskett, 1975,
 p56)



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As Furniss (1995) rightly observes, the corpus of early writing in indigenous West African languages cannot be separated from the history of Islam in that area as verses such as the above which directed attention to the sort of work traditional artists were expected to produce were sometimes written in Hausa, Fulfulde, or Wolof but in Arabic script (referred to as *ajami*). Writing that taught people about Islam and was highly moralistic in nature whether in the form of poetry or essays were generally preferred. The dan Fodio family provided numerous examples of this kind of writing which have survived to this day. However, in spite of attempts by religious clerics to discourage 'frivolous pursuits', what was produced in the name of religion has always existed alongside traditional creative forms like the oral narratives of the Hausa speaking people in the forms of *tatsuniyoyi* (tales), *labarai* (traditions) variations of dilemma tales or fables, and religious tales about prophets, angels and jinns (Starratt 1996). Similarly in Senegal, the storytelling, fables and verse created by the griots who are the traditional repositories of the oral arts were heavily embellished with references to the Quran and to stories of the prophets.

A pious strain ran through most creative productions and even when the subject of a piece of writing was not religious, homage was duly paid to the Prophet Muhammed in formal invocations both at the start and at the end the composition. Nevertheless while urging believers to seek God's assistance; some verses such as the following demonstrated a capacity for irreverence:

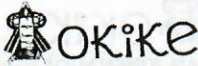
Whatever you do, O man, invoke the Lord's great name,
 If on the Lord you call for help, your work will not go wrong.
 And if you go forth to rob, Ask help from our good Lord!

And if you run after girls, invoke the Lord's great name.

(Mack 1982: 24)

Mack goes on to point out how in an attempt at demystifying his authority, some oral narratives ridicule figures of religious authority such as the imam. Here parallels can be drawn with African American folk tales which in spite of a deep seated belief in Christianity are nevertheless rich in satirical narratives about the peculiar habits and shortcomings of the preacher. Such oral treatments are precursors of characterizations found later in modern West African short stories and novels such as Ousmane Sembene's *Tribal Scars and Other Stories*, *Xala*, *God's Bits of Wood* and Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam* which in like manner interrogate religious figures who are found to be self-serving. But this occasional irreverence must not read as indicating the writer's rejection of Islam nor to what may be termed subversive tendencies as concluded by some critics. Thus the way a writer like Cheikh Hamidou Kane depicts religious characters with deep reverence and solemnity in *Ambiguous Adventure* is perhaps more true of the Muslim mind set. This view echoes an earlier one expressed by Rupert East in 1934 when he noted the reactions of Hausa Muslims in Nigeria to his suggestion that they write prose fiction following the western model:

The influence of Islam, superimposed on the Hamitic strain in the blood of the Northern Nigerian, produces an extremely serious-minded type of person. The art of writing, moreover, being intimately connected in his mind with his religion, is not to be treated lightly.... To these people, therefore, the idea of writing a book which was frankly intended neither for edification of mind, nor the good of the soul, a 'story' book which, however, followed none of the prescribed forms of storytelling, seemed very strange.... In short, it was



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necessary to explain to a very conservative audience a conception which was entirely new, and of doubtful value if not morality. (Skinner 1980: 6)

Islam and the Novel

Of all the different genres of literature, the novel is perhaps the most problematic for the Muslim writer. When religious beliefs and the need for artistic expression converge, writers who come from an Islamic background appear to tread carefully. This is because deeply ingrained in their psyche are certain notions of the sacrilegious which govern the limits of their artistic license. Creativity particularly in novel form is practised as long as it does not hurt religious feelings or run counter to established moral values. There is no better example of this attitude than the depth of reaction from the Muslim world to the perceived blasphemy of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. Thus it may be safe to posit that it is in the separation between what is permissible for use as literary material and what is not that lays the difference between Western and Islamic attitudes to imaginative creations.

Said (1978) provides one of the most important insights into the Islamic perspective when he asserts that the status of the Islamic sacred text, that is the Holy Quran, impinges directly on Muslim attitudes towards creative writing. They believe that the Quran is an authentic document that contains the divine words of God as revealed to Prophet Muhammad and which has been passed on unchanged through the centuries. The message of the Quran permeates all aspects of their lives and the guidance it provides concerning human behaviour, interpersonal relationships and indeed the very organization of society are

considered by Muslims as the most important ideals for which they need to strive. In his analysis of the hermeneutical traditions from which different notions of sacred texts arise, Said notes that whereas the holy books of Judaism and Christianity are regarded as incomplete and therefore sanction the authority of those who interpret them, Islam on the other hand regards the Quran as unique and complete, it is 'al Kitab', the only authentic text. Consequently, such a belief regards real originality or creativity as belonging entirely to God and renders 'all other texts impotent'. Hence, when scrutinized from such a point of view, the Western writer's absorption with his own creativity appears profane.

The Islamic view of artistic expression is therefore at odds with the Western Christian perspective which informs the novel. This is further highlighted when it is recalled that the novel form emerged in the West out of the need of writers to modify reality. As a creative form, it enabled them to represent characters and societies that move and grow as they mirror a 'process of engenderment or beginning and of growth possible or permissible for the mind to imagine' (Said 1975: 81). Novels are therefore in effect 'aesthetic objects that fill in gaps in an incomplete world.' On the other hand, the creative Muslim writer finds himself in a difficult position when 'the desire to create an alternative world, to modify, or augment the real world through the act of writing (which is one motive underlining the act in the West) is inimical to the Islamic worldview' (Said 1975: 81). Such a perspective inevitably affects the way Muslim writers view their creative art. Hence the modern West African writer who comes from an Islamic background finds himself in a bind and must of necessity negotiate a cautious route between his desire to utilize a genre



introduced to him by his historical experience of Western colonialism and the Islamic faith which is so deeply ingrained in his psyche and which far longer has shaped his thinking.

Furthermore, the approach of West African Muslim writers to prose-fiction and what it implies of creativity or originality is also determined by their particular view of the Islamic faith in which they are raised. That is, whether the writer's attitude to his first text, the Quran, is what Geertz (2000) terms 'scripturalist', meaning a literal and formalistic approach to Islam that is found among the majority Sunni Muslims in Nigeria or whether he leans towards a more mystical Sufi understanding of the faith as found among the Senegalese. This difference could also explain why more Muslim writers have emerged from Senegal than from Nigeria.

To explain further, the Sufi Muslim as found in Senegal can be described as one who is 'conscious of being like other men, a prisoner of the world of forms, but unlike them, he is also conscious of being free, with a freedom which immeasurably outweighs his imprisonment' (Lings 1977: 4). This frame of mind may at first appear to challenge the basic tenets of his faith with its demand for total submission to the will of God; it yet exhibits an awareness of the infinite possibilities pointed to in the Quran, of the growth of the mind and of the spirit, of the individual and of society. The Sufi's hermeneutical credo is explained by this evocative line in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*: 'Every verse of the Koran has an outside and an inside' (p.21).

These two approaches to the text, the literal, learned, esoteric one that discourages the interrogation of the Quran which is espoused by orthodox Sunni Muslims, and the exoteric, popular approach of the Sufi that encourages elaborations of the same can be discerned in the choices and treatment of issues

found in the novels of Muslim writers from Nigeria and Senegal. Most attempt to interrogate the individual and society but in different degrees depending on their particular view of Islam. Hence while Sembene brings socialist ideas to bear in *God's Bits of Wood* and in his other works, ideas which on the whole do not contradict Islam's view of communal (ummah) responsibility, Ba is more cautious in the position she takes on the issue on polygamy while Tahir is unequivocal about his allegiance to Islam. Both approaches share a basic acceptance of the ideals of Islam, therefore, most if not all the novelists from the Senegalese Ousmane Sembene, Mariama Ba, Aminata Sow Fall to the Nigerian Ibrahim Tahir and Abubakar Gimba consciously or subconsciously search for hidden truths that will raise the individual and society to that higher level of morality and justice for which the Quran instructs people to strive. In the works of these writers when Islam is cast in a positive light as an 'ethical faith', action takes the form of a dual jihad, a struggle against both external evil as well as against evil inclinations from within (Harrow 1991: 7). This internal conflict is intended to lead to a process of self-overcoming and in such instances Islamic virtue is portrayed as a matter of inner strength which brings about self-transformation or self-realization. This view of Islam contradicts observation once made by Trimmingham (1965) that:

Muslims place extreme emphasis on the externals of religion and make no important ethical demands. They have a unified and attainable religious social code of behaviour. They do not live as Christians do, in a state of tension, feeling that their lives fall short of their religious standard. Therefore no strain is put on them. Their religious life is wholly a matter of behaviour and conformity. (107)



A desire to define behaviour according to Islamic principles is certainly apparent in the novels by the writers mentioned above but there is also a constant awareness of the tension between essence and appearance, between ethics and externals. This is particularly evident in Tahir's *The Last Imam* where we find a novel deeply saturated with a consciousness of Islam, where religion is treated both as a 'subjective state and an objective factor, as both a matter of personal experience and as a social factor' (Irele 1990: 152).

Thus in their works, writers like the aforementioned Sow Fall, Tahir, Ba and Alkali comply with the requirements of their chosen genre but simultaneously, with the emphasis they place on obedience to a higher moral code, remain firmly within the bounds of what is acceptable to Islam. This is why Harrow claims that novels such as Ousmane Sembene's *Xala* and *White Genesis*, Zaynab Alkali's *Virtuous Woman* and Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam* all 'testify to a growing desire of writers to focus entirely upon comportment as defined according to a Muslim ethos.' As in the oral treatments, a subtle line is drawn in prose fiction between the irreverent treatment of important Islamic figures and major legal aspects of the religion. In works of almost all the writers mentioned above, Islamic precepts and laws that are mentioned in the Holy Quran are generally considered sacrosanct subjects.

The Matter of Canonisation

West African literature has bravely fought and won its place in field of literature. It can claim to possess a canon of works comprising writers and texts that are representative of particular interests and values but there is still discernible reluctance to admit certain works into it. If as Clippinger (2001: 46) points out

that the 'battle for canonicity involves the negotiation of several subjectivities towards a representative or set of representative literary templates', then in West African literature there is need to accommodate the voices of other experiences in order to have a more comprehensive canon. Yet the processes and procedures by which a text is elevated and deemed 'art' have resulted in the marginalization of certain significant contributions. On the one hand novels written in English from Nigeria enjoy a prestigious position in African literature, yet in a group that includes many respected names such as the highly acclaimed Chinua Achebe, Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, Booker Prize winner Ben Okri and Orange Prize winner Chimamanda Adichie as well as Flora Nwapa, Isidore Okpenwho, T.M. Aluko, Elechi Amadi, Cyprian Ekwensi, and Buchi Emecheta to mention a few more, why do only three others of note, Zaynab Alkali and Ibrahim Tahir and Abubakar Gimba write specifically about Islamic Nigerian societies?

In studying the contributions of Nigerian and Senegalese writers, one cannot help but note the significant disparity in the quantity of Islam-related literary work from these two West African countries. The presence of Islam is prominent in the literature from Francophone Senegal and perhaps this is to be expected as a larger percentage of Senegalese people, about ninety four percent of the population can claim Islamic heritage than the fifty percentor so found in Nigeria. As Cham points out, the bulk of novels and short stories from Senegalese writers such as Chiekh Hamidou Kane, Ousmane Sembene, Ahmadou Kohrouma, Ousmane Soce, Abdoulaye Sadj, Nafissatou Diallo, Aminata Sow-Fall, and Mariama Bâ dwell on Islam and the impact it has had on thought and action in Senegal (Harrow 1991: 172). Perhaps the different hermeneutic traditions, Sunni that is



adopted in Nigeria and Sufism that is found in Senegal may provide one explanation why the same focus is not as evident in literature from Nigeria but another reason could be the historical peculiarities of the two countries.

Under the British colonial regime, Nigeria was governed as three separate regions, Eastern, Western, and Northern. Here the British colonial system of indirect rule was deemed appropriate for the mainly Muslim Hausa speaking northern part of Nigeria while in the other two regions, colonial rule was more directly enforced. Following the lines of religious affiliation to either Islam or Christianity which ran more or less along the same lines of demarcation drawn by the colonial government, the imposition of European style education made quicker progress among the Igbo and Yoruba peoples of the Eastern and Western regions. Noting this fact of history literary critics have pointed out that the first generation of Nigerian writers formed a remarkably homogenous group as most of them including Achebe, Amadi, Nwapa, Ekwensi came from the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria, while a few such as Soyinka and Amos Tutuola came from the Yoruba people in the West. Together they formed an elite group that attended the first five government colleges run by missionaries. Some like Achebe, Soyinka, and Okara who went on to study at the University College, Ibadan eventually established the Mbari club for writers. Consequently, these writers emerged from a background in Western Christian education with tastes largely developed from their familiarity with the modernist movement pioneered by the likes of Joyce, Yeats, Pound and Eliot. The fact that the new written genres were pioneered by a new class of literati that were mission school educated would have implications for the critical discourse that followed.

Furthermore, since they started writing at a time when the question of identity was a major issue among educated Nigerians, they also possessed a strong sense of awareness of being members of particular ethnic groups and therefore demonstrated in their writings a strong allegiance to those cultural origins. For instance, Achebe was to later admit that his aim was to write about and for his Igbo people, to set the record straight and to restore their faith in themselves. Similarly, in response to the effects of colonialism and as a form of cultural assertion, Wole Soyinka employs the myth and traditions of the Yoruba people in his works. Following their examples, most other Nigerian writers have dealt with the colonial encounter by drawing upon the traditions and rich heritage of their people for literary inspiration. Perhaps because of the Negritude movement that was so popular in Francophone West Africa, writers from Senegal have similarly been preoccupied. Thus in the critical text *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature* (1983), Chinweizu et al claim that the African novel is a complex hybrid cultural phenomenon that combines Western and African cultural perspectives. But some creative works have emerged that cannot be so described. For instance, Tahir's *The Last Imam* does not join the cultural nationalism trend by mourning the traditional past but instead affirms specifically the values of Islam and the neglect of true Islamic principles. Unfortunately, such emphatic stress on the legitimacy of Islam in Nigerian society has proved problematic.

Before the publication of this novel, most Nigerian writers shared similar education, interests, assumptions, aesthetics and even politics, and not surprisingly promoted each other's work through literary criticism. However, in the case of Tahir's novel, in-depth critical attention is not forthcoming not because the



work lacks literary merit but perhaps because it advocates a point of view that is unfamiliar. The fact of publication or even the feat of remaining in print is not an indication of a novel's acceptance. A test for measuring the stature of African writers was once devised by Bernth Lindfors:

The unexamined literary career is not worth much in a noisy marketplace of ideas. To be famous, to be reputable, to be deemed worthy of serious and sustained consideration, an author needs as much criticism as possible, year after year. Only those who pass this test of time – the test of persistent interest in their art will stand a chance of earning literary immortality. (143)

It is not unexpected then that after the critical silence that greeted the publication of Tahir's novel in 1984, and the cursory interest generated by the works of Abubakar Gimba in the 1990s, not many other writers of note have emerged from Nigerian Muslim society.

For a brief moment in the 1970s, the publication of Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1962), Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) and Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* (1988) turned the discussion on West African novels away from the question of what language is appropriate for literary expression to the issue of religion but critical responses to Islam in modern West African literature have been less than subtle. The zealous embrace and advocacy of Islam found in Kane's novel has been held up in a negative light against Armah's and Ouologuem's denunciation of Islam as a colonial imposition and their vision of a treasured traditional African past the values of which can be translated into a contemporary outlook. Eminent literary critics see these two views as being irreconcilable and have concluded that the latter had more

merit. For example, a considerable part of Soyinka's critical text, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976) is devoted to the question of how social vision is shaped by religious ideology but even as he acknowledges the role Islam played in West African literary creations of the 19th and 20th centuries, he emphatically denies Kane's novel the merit of authenticity, perhaps because he treats Islam as an essential part of his people's worldview. On the other hand, depictions of a predatory Islam in the novels of Armah and Oulougem are praised as being more 'truthful' representations of the part Islam has played in Africa.

But according to Makward these novels depict Islam from an 'uncertain historical standpoint and not as it is lived and experienced today in any given Muslim African community' (Harrow 1991: 188). It appears that those writers who maintain a positive view of Islam are dismissed as mere apologists without much consideration being given to the literary contributions they make or indeed to the possibility that they may be tapping into a worldview they have long been familiar with for radical alternatives to the postcolonial African situation. On the whole, age long orientalist views appear to inform and dominate critical reactions to literature that speak of Islamic values and mores leading one to agree with Frye's theory that in spite of assertions that we as readers or critics freely express independent views on any given text, 'what we are clearly not free to do is to alter what is really a part of our cultural genetic code'. Hence, those schooled in the Western tradition are likely to bring institutionalized attitudes to bear on the subject of Islam in African novels.

At other times, when critics encounter texts that have their basis in an 'alien' culture, the temptation has been to impose meanings rather than to understand what is actually in the text.



This has led to partial or erroneous readings of such works. Lang (1991) cites a telling example of a colleague who remarked that Aminata Sow-Fall's *The Beggar Strike* 'tells of a beggar's strike after an official has tried to restrict downtown begging. This strike wreaks havoc with the almsgiving that is required by local custom'. Almsgiving (zakat) happens to be one of the principle five pillars of Islam; hence alluding to it in this way is similar to describing the Christian practice of confession for example in Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* as a quaint local tradition. Another instance of such reductive reading can be found in Abena Busia's (1992) article 'Rebellious Women', which she argues that while the writings of Mariama Bâ and Nawal El-Sadawi have much in common, 'the most striking parallel between them is not that they are both about Islamic African women...' Yet precisely what links these two women, one Senegalese, the other Egyptian together is the fact that they write about their Islamic experiences. To deny this is to deliberately ignore a common heritage which provides much of the inspiration for their works.

Senegalese novels that have written about Islam have generally fared better in literary criticism than Nigerian ones probably because they dwell more on the shifts in the social situation and in the mental universe of the African after contact with the West. It is ironic that although the French colonial policy of assimilation did its best to destroy African traditions and to create a secular state, a more vigorous quest for the authentic African identity has emerged from this part of West Africa. The literati in Senegal have consequently been able to evolve a clearer position of dissent from what seems to them alien philosophical and socio-political systems. For instance, in its focus on the conflict between the demands of the Islamic faith

and the socio-cultural consequences of western conquest, Samba Diallo, the hero in Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* is the archetypal figure of the burdened *assimilé* who is torn between two conflicting frames of moral and spiritual reference. Writing about this character, Irele (1990) observes that:

Around this figure, Kane has gathered up and woven into a significant whole all the elements within the divided consciousness of the westernized African caught between his acquired image in a new world of thought and effects, and his sense of his original self and aspiration to an original identity. (152)

The intensity with which Diallo grapples with his situation is competently represented by the meditative prose in which it is conveyed. We find a similarly reflective kind of narrative in Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam* but here the focus is on the struggle between tradition and Islam for the upper hand. Kane is aware that the familiar spiritual foundation is threatened by a new dispensation which may not provide a satisfactory alternative and ably employs the novel to express a vision of an African mode of existence rooted in the Islamic faith. With such preoccupations, Kane has much in common with the poets of the Negritude movement and is thus able to secure his place in the canon of African Literature.

This has been the state of affairs in West African literature, one where some writers and their texts have found acceptance because they write about societal concerns and perspectives that most critics find familiar. On the other hand, those who propose different viewpoints suffer being relegated to the periphery if not completely ignored. A critical piece of writing, like a work of fiction 'is not a mere play of the imagination; it is also a transcript of contemporary manners and customs and the



sign of a particular state of intellect' (Izevbaye 1979). Therefore the fact that some novels are written from a different perspective does not make them less deserving of study. We can therefore conclude that although the self-conception and socio-religious cultural background of West African Muslim writers is somewhat different and that they are not always at ease in representing truths or positions that were previously interpreted by their religious texts, their works nevertheless are creative constructions of language that attempt to fill a gap. Hence in the light of more knowledge about the nature of literature and a better understanding of the complexity of society, there is need to develop a lively critical heritage that will support the growth and relevance of the West African novel.

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