
(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

“(De) Centralising Power and Negotiating an Ideal African Identity: A Study of Kenjo Jumbam's *The White Man of God* and Francis Ateh's *Seat of Thorns*”

Dr. Tse Valery Anye
Assistant Lecturer,
University of Dschang, Cameroon
tsevalery7@gmail.com

Abstract

*This paper examines the clash between the European religious practices and the African ways of worship as represented in *The White Man of God* by Kenjo Jumbam, and the strategies proposed by Francis Ateh in *Seat of Thorns* to reconcile these oppositional binaries. The borne of contestation in this research is the persistent conflict as a result of the rejection of the Kom and Nso cultural practices by the whites. The cultural practices of these natives as seen in the novels are considered by the church authorities as pagan and should not be brought close to the church. The paper is thus predicated upon the hypothesis that the incorporation of certain African practices in church rituals as seen in *Seat of Thorns* is an ideal way of reconciling cultural differences in worshipping God, thereby, improving upon Christianity in these communities. The theoretical framework chosen for this study is the postcolonial theory. The analysis of the two novels demonstrates the inability of the Catholic Church authorities to accept the African system of worship in church rituals. The paper concludes that the incorporation of the indigenous forms of worship creates a strong bond between the two cultures, leading to peace and harmony among the people of the Kom and the Nso society as it reconciles the antagonism that has existed between these people.*

Keywords: Culture, clash, deconstruction, hybridity, otherness, stereotypes, resistance

Introduction

This paper seeks to examine the cultural clash that broke out in the Kom and the Nso communities as a result of the contact between the African religious system and Catholicism, as well as the measures proposed by Francis Ateh and Kenjo Jumbam in their novels under study to reconcile these oppositional binaries. It is worthy to note that clashes between Christianity and tradition were very common during the colonial era in Africa as the Europeans considered the African traditional practices as evil, savage and barbaric, and tried to replace them by Eurocentric cultural codes which they considered to be civilised. The Europeans considered these African modes of worship as pagan and equated them to witchcraft, thereby concluding that Africans needed salvation, and could only be freed

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

through Christianity. This accounts for the introduction of Christianity in Africa. However, the introduction of this new Eurocentric religion met with much resistance from the indigenes who did not only see this religion as a threat to their own traditional religious practices, but also as accomplices of institutionalised exploitation, humiliation and dehumanisation especially during the periods of slave trade and colonisation. However, the collapse of slave trade and the fall of colonisation in the 18th and 19th centuries respectively transformed the religious landscape as the missionaries now placed humanity at the centre of the gospel, thus, converting many Africans.

Some of the early converts were completely carried away as a means to escape domination and the dehumanisation that they had experienced in the hands of the colonial masters, while others joined to escape from some of the harsh aspects of the African culture like the throwing of twins in the evil forest, represented in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Some others converted to Christianity so as to be considered civilise. Hence, some of these new converts became overzealous and perceive their indigenous culture as pagan. Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin White Masks*, terms this as the apex of black man's subordination as the blacks turn to adopt the coloniser's culture in order to be recognise as civilised.

Since Christianity mingled with some of the indigenous practices of the natives, the natives mounted coercive and psychological resistance. Such cultural clashes are recurrent in Kenjo Jumbam's *The White Man of God* and Francis Ateh's *Seat of Thorns*.

Statement of the Problem

The problem underlying this research is the fact that the introduction of Christianity in indigenous African communities like the Nso and the Kom communities has led to persistent cultural shocks and conflicts as the Roman Catholic Church authorities reject every aspect of the Nso and Kom traditional religious practices as they consider these practices as savage and pagan. This paper seeks to answer the following question: How do the Roman Catholic church authorities denigrate the African traditional practices? How do the Nso people as presented in the novels under study reject the undermining of their cultural practices by the church authorities? And finally, what are the strategies proposed by these authors to reconcile the persistent conflict between the Roman Catholic church practices and the African traditional practices in their novels?

Objective of the Study

This paper examines the cultural conflict between the European religious practices and the African traditional mode of worship as presented by Kenjo Jumbam's *The White Man of God* and Francis Ateh's *Seat of Thorns*, and the strategies proposed by these authors to reconcile these oppositional binaries.

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

Hypothesis

The paper is predicated upon the hypothesis that the Roman Catholic Church authorities used discourses and ideologies which aimed at debilitating and rejecting the moral worth of the African traditional practices of the native Nso and Kom people as they considered these practices to be pagan, savage, uncivilised and evil. Such considerations sparked conflict between these two opposing religions

The second premise is that, in moments of domination, characters devise strategies to counter repression. This is usually mostly done through resistance. In the *White Man of God*, characters mount physical as well as psychological resistance depending on the situation, they find themselves.

The last assumption of this paper is that incorporating certain aspects of the African traditional practices in church rituals is a potent manner of ameliorating upon the worship of God, which will go a long way to prevent cultural conflict in African traditional communities like the Nso and Kom communities in Cameroon.

Theoretical Framework

The theory chosen for this work is the postcolonial theory. It refers to a set of critical perspectives in literature that grapple with the legacy of colonial rule. As a literary theory, it deals with literature produced in countries that were once or that are presently colonies of other countries. It can still be better described in the in the words of Elleke Boehmer as a literary analytic approach about the “conditions in which colonised people seek to take their place forcibly or otherwise as historical subjects” (Boehmer3). Postcolonial theory further involves analysis of the dilemmas of developing a national identity in the wake of colonial rule, the ways in which writers of colonised countries attempt to articulate and even celebrate their cultural identities and reclaim them from the colonisers. It also considers the way the knowledge of the colonised peoples has served the interest of the colonisers and how the knowledge is produced and used and the ways in which the discourse of the colonial powers is used to justify colonialism through the perpetuation of the images of the colonised as inferior. Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* published in 1978 is considered to be the theory’s founding work. However, other advocates of this theory include Chinua Achebe, John Lye, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, just to name a few. According to Ania Loomba in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, postcolonial literary criticism is “the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism” (12). From the claim of these various critics, the postcolonial theory aimed at debunking the status quo of colonialism. This theory will help us discuss the themes of otherness and resistance.

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

The postcolonial theory is supported by a variety of concepts but for the sake of this paper, we are going to use the concepts of otherness, resistance and hybridity. The postcolonial theory is supported by a variety of concepts. One of the major concepts of postcolonial theory is otherness. To John Lye, in an article entitled “Some Issues in Postcolonial Theory”, “The western concept of the oriental is based, as Abdul JanMohamed argues, on the Manichean allegory (seeing the world as divided into mutually excluding opposites): if the west is ordered, rational, masculine, good, then the orient is chaotic, irrational, feminine, evil etc.” (<http://www.Brocku.ca/English/course/4F70/postcol.html>) This quote by John Lye is relevant because in our texts under study, characters are faced in situations that address them as other.

One of the most disputed concepts in postcolonial theory is hybridity. It commonly refers to “the creation of a new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonialism” (Ashcroft et al, 118). These critics also highlight in the *Post-colonial Studies Reader* that the crossover inherent in the imperial experience is essentially a two-way process and postcolonial writing has focused on the hybridised nature of postcolonial culture as strength rather than a weakness. As seen above, hybridity basically refers to mixture. The term originates from biology and was subsequently employed in linguistics and in racial theory in the nineteenth century. The history of hybridity is characterised by literature and theory that focuses on the effects of mixture upon identity and culture. A key text in the development of hybridity is Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* which analyses the liminality of colonial anxiety. His key argument is that colonial hybridity, as a cultural form, produces ambivalence in the colonial masters and as such alters the authority of power (112).

Homi Bhabha explains the idea of a ‘a new social order’ as a contingent borderline experience that opens up in-between colonisers and colonised (Bhabha 112). In this sense, hybridity is an ambivalent location, “a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures, between different hegemonies in active contention” (Bhabha 206).

Analysis and Discussions

This paper has three analytical parts. The first part presents how the whites through Christianity denigrate the African culture, belief and traditional practices. This is done through the discourses which aimed at belittling every aspect of the culture of the natives and replacing them with western cultures. The second part presents the main strategy used by characters to reclaim themselves as historical subjects. This is actually through resistance, as these characters resisted the dogmatism of the Roman Catholic religion and discourses which aimed at subjugating them. The last part of this paper presents the new ways of practicing Christianity as proposed in the novels under study.

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

Christianity and the Dehumanisation of the People

One of the weapons used by the Europeans to colonise and exploit Africa was Christianity. Early European missionaries were unfamiliar with the African cosmos and its diverse cultures, tradition and customs and so, viewed these practices as pagan, savage and barbaric and thus sought to reform them with their Christian doctrine. Christianity, which is part of the Eurocentric culture, was perceived by the Europeans as a representation of western civilisation and the basis of morality which the rest of the non-white race, especially the Africans was supposed to follow. This is because native Africans were perceived to be different. That is, culturally inferior, backward, uncivilised and evil. Kenjo Jumbam's *The White of God* and Francis Ateh's *Seat of Thorns* represent colonialist discourses about the uncivilised and backward nature of the Africans, specifically the Kom and Nso natives who were considered as heathens, resigned to live a life of savagery. The native Kom and Nso indigenes were perceived as different not only because of their colour, but also because of their culture, which was considered as pagan.

In *The White Man of God*, there are instances whereby the customs, traditions and cultures of the Nso people have been considered by the Roman Catholic authorities as primitive, savage and even evil. An instance is seen in the reaction of the white man of God on Easter Sunday after the Christians of Nkah took part in the celebration of the anniversary of the Fon's death at the Fon's palace. This is usually a big ceremony in the Nkah community as all the people gather at the Fon's palace to partake in the cultural manifestations which includes a series of rites and rituals, performed by all the sacred cults and juju groups of the Nkah community. Coincidentally, this ceremony took place on a Saturday which also happened to be Easter eve, and as such there were many activities in the church like confession and baptism. However, after the mass in the morning, some Christians participated in the ceremony at the palace, and even forgot to attend evening mass on that same day. On Easter Sunday, the white man of God expressed his anger against the congregation in the following remark: "Yesterday was Easter eve, the eve of the great Christian feast day. Most of you went to confession and several of you were baptised. Yet, you all swept away to the palace soon after wards to drink and dance pagan dances and bow down to pagan jujus. I saw it all with my own eyes. Are you Christians or Christian-pagans?" (Jumbam59) From the discourses of the white man of God, we realise that when two hegemonic forces come into contact, the tendency for them is to rely on ideologies, myths and stereotypes that define their various cultures. It is based on this that the white man of God considers the aspects of the culture of the indigenous Nso people as pagan and evil. This definition is echoed in Abdul Jan Mohamed's "The Economy of Manichean Allegory" in which he views the empire's definition of the colonial setting as a world that has not yet been domesticated by European signification or codified in detail by its ideology. That world is

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

therefore perceived as uncontrollable, chaotic, unattainable and ultimately evil (*The Post-colonial Studies Reader* 18).

The myths, stereotypes and discourses used by the white missionaries were aimed at denigrating the cultural practices of the Nso people in contrast to their Eurocentric culture which they considered as civilise, good, ordered and therefore superior to that of the natives. This created a psychological impact on the psyche of the people of Nkah in particular and the Nso in general, who started perceiving their cultural practices as evil, and thus converted into the new strange religion. This is the case with characters like Pa Matiu who now turns to associate everything evil with the black colour. In the course of interpreting the gospel, Pa Matiu said:

The man on whom the rubber tree fell was a black man. Other black men came and saw him suffering under the rubber tree and went their way. Even his own brother from the same father came and saw him, his clothes torn and his body full of wounds, and he too went away. Why? Because we black men do not love each other and Christ meant to teach us to love, not only our brothers, but everyone just as we love ourselves. The man who came from a strange country and saved the black man from death was a white man. (Jumbam44)

From this except, we observe that blacks who were converted into this new religion tend to believe that everything concerning the colour black is demonic and devilish. It is for this reason that in his preaching, Pa Matiu presents the black man as evil, heartless and with no sense of love for humanity, while presenting the whites as good, and possessing a kind heart full of love for humanity. It is based on this wicked nature, according to him, that the blacks are unable to rescue their own kind. Thus, Pa Matiu urges the natives of Nkah to convert to Christianity, which he claims is the only way through which the blacks can be redeemed.

Furthermore, the Christians of Nkah just like Pa Matiu have become overzealous, so much so that they tend to perceive every aspect of their culture as evil. This is seen in Beri's reaction towards Tansa, and subsequently, Tansa's mother's reaction after Tansa takes part in the sacrifice at the Fai's courtyard in Mborn:

The Fai was offering a sacrifice on behalf of the family. He stood there on a tombstone with the sacrificial cock in his hand. Then he bent and put the cock's legs under his right foot and the wings under the left and recited the following prayer... Holding the upper and the lower parts of the chicken's beak he pulled them apart thus tearing the head into two. The chicken struggled in his hands and the blood spurted out and flowed on the tombstone. The Fai took the blood from the tombstone on his forefinger and marked it on the men's chest and between the big and other toes of the women's left feet. After that the cock was roasted and those present, myself included, were given a piece. I cleaned my mouth well before leaving the Fai's courtyard. (Jumbam19)

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

This is an example of a typical Nso traditional ritual done as a means of connecting the people to their ancestors and seeking for blessings and protection from the ancestors. However, this ritual is considered by the Christians as a pagan sacrifice and, as such, evil. The reaction of Beri when her brother returns home after the sacrifice justifies this. “Aha! You took part in a pagan sacrifice!... wait till Mama comes back from the farm. Wait till papa comes back in the evening... look at your chest... it was when I noticed that I had forgotten to rub off the blood from my chest” (Jumbam19). From the reaction of Beri, we realise that the Christians perceived such indigenous practices as a taboo and so partaking in them was considered as a crime that should be punished severely. Tansa’s punishment for participating in this ‘pagan sacrifice’ was serious beating from Mama, and then the pronouncement “Go to bed. You shall have no food this evening. Then she added. You will sleep alone. Lavran will sleep with Maria. I don’t want you to contaminate my son with your sins nor entangle him with those chains which Satan has tied you” (Jumbam29). Therefore, Tansa has been equated the child of the devil just because he participated in the sacrifice and, as such, is treated accordingly.

The reaction from Beri and Mama reveals that most blacks who were converted into Christianity soon became overzealous extremists and, thus, perceived their native African traditional practices as heathen. In *Black Skin White Masks*, Frantz Fanon terms such behaviour as the apex of black man’s subordination, as the blacks tend to adopt the coloniser’s culture in order to be recognised as civilised. In *The Heart of Redness*, Wilhelm Goliath, an advocate of Christianity, believes that the religions of the ama Xhosas are devilish. When preaching, he urges the natives to convert to Christianity, which he claims is the only way toward salvation. A similar situation of such fanatical and extremist behaviour is the reaction of Enoch the fanatical convert in *Things Fall Apart* who goes to the extent of disrespectfully unmasking an egwugwu, as well as killing the sacred piton.

One of the reasons which push these converts to become overzealous in this new religion is the mystery of ‘hell fire’. The natives have been made to believe that all those who do not respect the commandments of God would perish in the fire that burns forever and ever. This discourse alone plays significantly on the psyche of these natives, creating a sort of panicking, and as a result, their every action is characterised by the fear of burning for eternity in hell. For instance, after taking part in the sacrifice at the Fai, Tansa becomes very disturbed about his fate and constantly utters this when faced with a situation. “O God, Satan wants to take advantage of my having eaten the sacrificial chicken to take me hell. I wept because I understand what was happening. Satan knew that if I died at that moment I would go straight to hell” (Jumbam20). The mystery of hell has, thus, conditioned the thinking pattern of the natives of Nkah. Even when Pauline tries to convince Widin and Maria to indulge to prostitution so as to be able to have money for their contribution for baptism, the

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

girls are reluctant because they know the wages of sin is hell fire. However, Pauline tries to convince them with another mystery, which is that of confession. By the way she asked the other two girls, "Is there any sin that baptism cannot wash?" (Jumbam18) Even when the white man of God brutalises Lukar's mother in church just because she was attacked by one of her sudden fits of coughing, the entire congregation becomes worried not because of this inhuman treatment. The people are worried because the white man made the utterance, "to hell-to hell-to hell-(Jumbam59). To them, Lukar's mother has been cursed to go to hell by the white man. This justifies why after the mass, they had to go and apologise to the white man on her behalf, and they only got relieved when he accepted the apologies.

The fear of burning for eternity in hell and the mystery of confession engulf the mind of Tansa so much so that even on his way to doctrine classes, he keeps thinking about. This fear makes him to become worried about a squirrel he meets on his way to church one morning, which is eating carrots on a farm. Tansa thinks about the crime this animal is committing and then sympathises with the animal which, to him will go to hell. "Do squirrels go for confession? This one had been stealing and if he did not confess his sin he would certainly go to hell – fire. That would be terrible" (Jumbam7). From this rhetorical question, we understand that Tansa is not only naïve and confuse, it demonstrates how ignorant the people are. Even when Tansa decides to meet Lucy and express his love to her, he is caught in a psychological battle. He battles with his conscience to convince himself that he is right, and he battles with his conscience to keep his sin secret. However, deep down inside him, a voice continues to ring, "Satan! Hell! Hell – fire for eternity!" (Jumbam94).

With the coming of Christianity in the Nso land, specifically in the Nkah community, many natives were converted into this new religion. The white men who are the religious leaders together with their new religion give the natives the impression of equality between humans, and how the poor and the meek will inherit the kingdom of God. They convinced the natives that Christianity is cost free, for Christ Jesus has already paid the price with his blood on the cross. Ironically, the church becomes an exploitative institution which impoverishes the natives as the church authorities collect even the last franc from the poor Christians through the numerous church contributions. Widin narrates her miserable situation to Pauline and Maria when she says:

I have sold all the cassava on my farm and also sold my two chickens, but the amount has just been barely enough to pay for my church contribution. And believe me I have not a drop of cooking oil in the house and my mother has been scolding me for paying all the money I have to the mission when I can't afford to have cooking oil in the house... I am going to be baptised on Easter day and I must provide myself with a white dress and a white hair scarf besides paying for my contribution. I have worked for two weeks on Chicha's farm, for four weeks in the Mission and I have sold all the

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

crops on my farm and paid for my church contribution. The problem now is where to get the money for my baptism dress. (Jumbam16-17)

From this excerpt, we see that the church, which could rather be a place of comfort, and provide financial and moral support to these poor and the needy natives, is rather ironically an instrument of economic exploitation as it extorts even the last franc from these poor Christians. The church therefore becomes an institution which impoverishes the Christians. The question one can therefore ask judging on the situation of Widin is that, does life end after baptism? How will she survive after being baptised, given the fact that she has nothing left? We therefore see the burden that the natives of Nkah are facing by joining this new religion. This financial hardship and the excess demands from the church push some female Christians to engage into prostitution to meet up with the excessive church demands. An example is Pauline, who always travels to Bamenda to her sister's place, where she hawks her body to pay for her contributions. While convincing Maria and Widin to follow her to Bamenda, she makes the following declarations:

Two weeks from now, I shall be going to Bamenda to see my sister. She lives in Abakwa and sells palm wine. If you care we can go there together. That is how I managed to get my baptism dress and pay my church contributions...I help her to sell liquor... when the liquor is finished, you can make business with one of the men and you will be surprised what he gives you the next day. I tell you they have money. (Jumbam17)

We therefore notice the precarious situation these natives find themselves just to raise money for to pay for church contributions and buy baptism dress. It is rather shocking that the Roman Catholic Church and its religious leaders pay attention to trivial things like white baptism dress instead of focusing on the moral and spiritual uprightness of the Christians. Prostitution is a sin; however, the Christians have been brainwashed to believe that baptism washes away all sins. Pauline argues that "Is there any sin that baptism cannot wash away? But will you be given baptism if you do not pay your church contributions? If you do not have your white dress and white hair scarf?" (Jumbam18).

We also observe that the church does not only rob the natives financially, but the women of Nkah are also sexually exploited by the church authorities. Tansa narrates a scene he witnessed on Saturday night after the evening mass when he was unable to find Lucy:

I had lost sight of Lucy. Where was she? I ran in the direction of her home but did not see her. Then I ran back in the hope that she might be looking for me, but she was not around... I gave up. Then turning around to go home, I saw something that amazed me. Lucy and Big Father were walking from his house! (Jumbam95)

Tansa just like any other person is not amazed simply because Lucy is with Big Father, for it is normal for a priest to be seen with a Christian. The problem here is that Big Father is seen

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

with a young girl at night, which of course is an ungodly hour, and they are from the father's house. This is evident that he must have had sex with her. The idea that these white men have been exploiting their female Christians sexually is further confirmed through an exchange between Tansa and a boy from the Basel mission, when the boy says, "You Catholics teach bad habits and bad lessons. What your white man of God does shows that your religion is corrupt... Your white man of God sleeps with Lucy" (Jumbam100). Tansa responds to this by saying, "What about your Basel white man of God who slept with Anton's mother?" (Jumbam 100). This justifies that these church authorities use the ignorance of these natives and exploit them economically and even sexually.

We have presented how the colonialist discourses used by the white men in Nkaha aimed at creating a sense of inferiority in the natives while emphasising the superiority of their western cultures. In the novel, we realised that characters like the white man of God and Big Father are symbols of colonialist oppression. They define the natives of Nkaha in marginal terms. These definitions are aimed at debilitating the minds of these people, so much so that Pa Matiu starts associating everything evil to the colour black. We shall proceed by showing how characters in Francis Ateh's *Seed of Thorns* resist the dogma of the Roman Catholic religion, as well as the colonialist discourses used by these westerners to subjugate the natives of Kom.

Resistance to the Doctrine and Practices of the Western Religion

Just like Kenjo Jumbam, Francis Ateh represents the colonialist discourses of the whites, specifically the Roman Catholic Church authorities who perceive every aspect of the culture of the Kom people as pagan, and thus, should be gotten rid of. However, Francis Ateh, through his main character, Father Ndong, mounts a significant resistance against the dogma of the Roman Catholic church and its racist discourses vis a vis the indigenous culture of the Kom people.

One of the aspects of Christianity strongly resisted by Father Ndong Peter is the rejection of some of the aspects of the culture of the indigenous people in the church. It should be noted that since the whites consider the culture of the blacks as evil and their rituals as pagan practices, they therefore reject any of these practices to be transported into the church. However, when Ndong is posted as the priest of the parish at Ninga, he challenges the status quo and reverses everything relating to the customs of the Catholic doctrine. Face with a clash between the Western religion which forbids men from wearing caps in church, and the Kom tradition which forbids the appearance of the Fon in public without his cap, Ndong questions why women were allowed to wear caps in church and men could not. He also asked, "Did Bishops and senior church officials not wear caps?" (Ateh24). After meditating, he concludes that, "The Fon would be allowed to wear his cap in church" (Ateh 24). Father Ndong also questions some of the laws of the church, like that of regular dressing

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

code of the mass servers and realises that these laws were merely aspects of the Eurocentric culture which have been imposed on to Africans as a means of erasing the indigenous cultures and identity of the natives. After reading and meditating on the Bible, there is nowhere Ndong finds which forbids the priest and the mass servers from wearing the African traditional clothes. As a result, he abolishes this tradition of wearing regular vestment during church ritual. When Ndong is summoned by the Bishop in Atuisong, he narrates this to Father Humphry:

What is it in the vestment father? Does the solemnity of the gospel depend on what we wear when we preach? I think that it is one's dedication to the gospel that matters, not what one wears. Did Jesus wear anything special before preaching? As far as the wearing of caps by men is concerned, I must be honest with you, I realized a resinous clash with our culture here. Kom notables are not supposed to be seen in the public bareheaded. I realised that if I had to convert the Fon and his notables, I would be forced to allow them to wear their caps. Then I asked myself, 'What is there in caps? Don't women wear caps in church? Does the Bishop here not wear his cap in church? Where in the Bible is the wearing of caps forbidden?... (Ateh103)

From this citation, we understand that the early missionaries, just like the Whites in Kom failed because of the rigid rules they imposed on the natives, thus making God to look like he was a God of the whites. However, Ndong deconstructs these current conditions by reversing some of these rigid rules in the church in Nkah. Father Ndong also questions the use of foreign languages like Latin and English that the people did not understand and changed this with the Kom language. (Ateh28) According to Ndong, most of these rules set by the Roman Catholic church are not biblical and are out to denigrate the cultures of the Africans which he will not tolerate. While defending himself at the bishop's house in Atuisong, he says:

When I look at the things we lay emphasis on in the church today, I do not find a basis for them in the Holy Bible. I see a doctrine based on European culture and traditions being imposed on a people who also have their own strong traditions. This to me is motivated by sheer racism, and racism is condemned by God; ... It has been difficult for Christianity to break through fully in Africa, because those who brought this Good News here refused to think that there is anything good in African system of belief. They thought that all that is good in Africa are our minerals, and natural forest riches, which have been stolen and recklessly exploited, even with the complicity of the church till date. Why not adapt the Christian faith to our tradition? The focus should be on the scriptures, not on a tradition that I believe has its own limits. (Ateh106-107)

From the above excerpt, it is revealed by Ndong that the Roman Catholic religion transported to Africa is a tool used by the Europeans to brandish the superiority of their culture by encouraging racism and exploiting the Africans. To him, this religion is not based on biblical

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

truth as it rather relies on trivialities aimed at erasing the cultures of the Africans. That is why he takes it upon himself to question some of these dogma and practices and reverse those that do not have any biblical backing. Upon listening to his justifications and the logic in them, Fr Giovanni and Fr Muliligan agreed that, “He touches on the very essence of enculturation, just that he goes about it the wrong way...” (Ateh 107).

Another aspect of the Roman Catholic Church that Ndong resist is the economic exploitation of the indigenous people by the church authorities, through the numerous church collections and special contributions made for the Pope. These contributions are made in all the branches of the church, and then sent to the Bishop, who then sends the money to the Pope in Rome. In *Seat of Thorns*, after this money has been collected, Ndong deliberately refuses to send the money, but diverts it to the construction of other branches of churches in Nkah. He makes the following justifications to the bishop when the later demands why Ndong refused to send his percentage of church contributions to the diocese, as well as his refusal to make the special contributions to the Pope as directed by the episcopal letter:

Your Lordship, the church in my village is very poor. You remember I told you we have had to construct nine churches within this short time I have been in Ningan. The reports were forwarded to you. How do you think the people could have achieved all of this and still be able to send money to the diocese and to Rome? Between you and I, your Lordship, does Rome need that money? Should Rome not send their support to these poor churches here? I have been to the Vatican and when I see the affluence there and the assets of the church there, I am deeply convinced that the church does not need the contributions of poor Africans. On the contrary, the Pope should send his support to our local churches. That is why I refused to overburden my people with those contributions. (Ateh105-106)

Through the justification raised by Ndong, it is evident that the Roman Catholic Church is a financial-oriented enterprise with the aim of exploiting the resources of the poor Africans. Ndong does not see any reason why these contributions should be sent to Rome because, according to him, this money can rather be used to enhance the development of the local area as well as the advancement of the work of the kingdom of God. During the period of these contributions, the bishop sends his episcopal letter with discourses such as, ‘God loves a cheerful giver and that he rewards those who give’. Such discourses aimed at softening the minds and hearts of the indigenes, then exploit them economically. However, Ndong rejects this idea of sending money to Roman and states that the Pope is rather rightfully placed to send money to these poor Africans.

Ndong also resists the church’s perception about polygamy and the refusal of the sacrament of baptism to polygamists. Polygamy is part of the African culture which the people venerate, so much so that an African man is respected in terms of the number of wives

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

he has. Akosua Aidou reiterated the notion that “plurality of wives was a sign of affluence and power in African societies. John Mbiti stated in the introduction to his book, *Akamba Stories* that, “polygyny was, and is, an important and accepted institution, serving many useful purposes in African societies”. However, European cultures are monogamous and as a result, since Christianity is their culture, it does not tolerate polygamy. These church authorities fail to understand this cultural reality and, as such, forbid the polygamous natives from receiving the sacrament of baptism. In *The White Man of God* for instance, a character like Dubila is willing to be baptised in this new religion, but the only obstacle is that she is the third wife of Fonjo. However, the only condition for her to be baptised as the white man of God says is for Fonjo to put away the other wives and marries only Dubila. This makes Fonjo to become furious and fuming in anger before leaving the presence of the priest. (Jumbam51) We notice in this instance the negative effect of Christianity, which leads to forceful separation of families. Father Ndong in *Seat of Thorns* is faced with a similar situation when he succeeds to convert the Fon to Christianity. The Fon is polygamous just like other men in Kom but Father Ndong baptises them. Deconstructing this Eurocentric ideology, Ndong says:

The church preach that we should have only one wife. When I read the Bible carefully, I do not see this written anywhere. On the contrary, I see that God in the Old Testament had direct relation with people who were polygamists. God love King Solomon who married more than seven hundred wives and kept four hundred concubines... Why should God who tolerate an even advised some prophets whom we still worship today, to take more wives, decide to punish our own king, for marrying several women? (Ateh32)

Father Ndong questions this aspect of Catholicism which prevents enthusiastic Kom indigenes to be part of this religion as it dehumanises the natives. This is because it leads to the division of families as it forces the polygamous families, to separate before they can be baptised. To Ndong, the church is laying emphasis on trivialities rather than the scriptures, and so he endeavours to reverse these wrongs basing on what is written in the Bible. Even when he is summoned by the bishop, he asserts, “where in the Bible in Christ’s teaching does he talk about one man one wife?... Does the idea about one man one wife not come from the European culture? Why does the church stop Africans from worshipping God in their own way in their own countries? Why force the European culture on us?” (Ateh104) Through these rhetorical questions, we understand Ndong’s dissatisfaction with this colonialist ideology of the superiority of the western cultures.

One major aspect venerated by the Roman Catholic church is the notion of saints as their pictures are pasted on the walls in church. This was not the case in the parish at Ningan as Ndong rejects posting the pictures of the white saints in church. He instead put up pictures

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

of the ancestors of the people in church, encouraging them to pray through. Ndong affirms this when he tells the Bishop that:

We needed to make them understand that if they live exemplary lives, they too could become saints. Why should we think that those who eventually get to heaven are only whites?... You see, the fundamental difference between my people's beliefs and the Christian faith was just that our people believe that they must pray to God through their ancestors. If the church encourages us to pray through Saints, why does it stop our people from praying through our ancestors? The Saints they pray to are distant and unknown to them... (Ateh105)

This very action of Fr Ndong to dismantle the pictures of the Saints on the wall and replace them with those of the ancestors of the people is an attempt to deconstruct the European ideology that Saints are white and are the only beings that could carry the prayers of people to God as he demonstrates that ancestors too can play that role of linking the people to God too. This is similar in Kenjo Jumbam's *The White Man of God*, as we see Yaya rejecting the idea of the blacks being forced to believe in the white man's ancestors. We see this when Yaya in a conversation with Tansa's mother says:

...know that when we talk of God, nobody has ever really seen him. Only the dead see him. You cannot talk to God or beg him or pray to Him and he hears you because you are alive and human. Only the dead and spirits can go to him and talk with him in the language of the spirits. And who can talk better on your behalf to God than the spirits of your ancestors? And when you break away from them as you want to do, how do you expect to receive your own favors from God? You follow this new way of the white man. He leads you to God through his own ancestors and you just accept it and carry all the children there. (Jumbam32)

Yaya's worries are that the whites cannot ignore and reject the ancestors of the indigenes, making them to believe that their ancestors are evil, and force them to worship and pray through the ancestors of the whites. According to Yaya, our ancestors know us best because they were once humans and resided among the living and so understand our ways best and therefore, are better placed to transmit our prayers to God than a strange ancestor who does not even know us will do. This accounts for why Ndong dismantles the pictures of the Saints in his church and replaces them with pictures of blacks. By doing this, he makes the people realise that the church is part and parcel of their lives. He even attests that, "As a bonteh and king maker in Kom, I have taken part in and even performed several key sacrifices myself. This has permitted me to see and understand that the sacrifices and rituals are not bad at all... what is wrong about people pouring some palm-wine and calling on their ancestors to beg the Almighty Father to bless their land. Even in the Bible, Jews offered sacrifices" (Ateh 105).

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

The analyses in this section demonstrate how the dogma of the Roman Catholic religion as well as the colonialist discourses of the whites is resisted. Francis Ateh uses characterisation and style to represent this resistance through his main character, Ndong. The next section of this work demonstrates the aspirations of Francis Ateh and Kenjo Jumbam as they fashion a new social order.

Reconciling Christianity and African Traditional Practices as a Means Towards the Creation of a New Space

This section of the work goes beyond the examination of resistance to examine the strategies proposed by Francis Ateh and Kenjo Jumbam in reconciling these oppositional cultures as a means of creating a new space of peace, harmony, and fraternity between the natives of Kom and Nso with this new western religion. There has been continuous conflict as a result of the fact that the Roman Catholic church authorities in Nso and in Kom refuse to accept anything positive in the culture of these people as they consider these practices as pagan, and thus, seek to erase them with aspects of the western cultures considered to be more deserving. This causes tension as the natives resist these new culture and religion. However, some characters, like Father Ndong in Francis Ateh's *Seat of Thorns* and Yaya in *The White Man of God*, seek to reconcile these two religions. This is done through hybridity and the incorporation of certain aspects of the people's culture into the church.

When Father Ndong is posted by the Bishop at Ningan, the Bishop makes the following pronouncement:

Congratulations Peter! I am convinced you shall win more souls for Christ in your village. You understand your people and their customs very well and I think you are the best person to reverse the damage that Fr Jensen caused the church in Ningan...Preach the gospel to your people in their language, take the word even into their juju societies. Remember... Do not dismiss your customs and traditions without exploring them and finding out what they represent for your people and how they can be brought into the church or modified to serve the Almighty. (Ateh2)

Fr Jensen has caused a serious clash between the people of Ningan and the church as a result of his intolerance of the culture of these people. The Bishop is convinced that Father Ndong who understands the culture of his people is best to make right the wrongs committed by the white missionaries like Fr Jensen who was not versed with these cultural practices. Having this in mind, Ndong decides to incorporate the positive aspects of the people's culture into the Roman Catholic Church rituals while reversing the dogma in this religion which are not Biblical.

The first challenge Father Ndong is to face in Ningan is inheriting his late uncle and performing sacrifices to the god of the land. Being conscious about this, he makes up his

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

mind after praying to God to be crowning the chief. This is confirmed when he tells the Fon, “Mbehhh, I have come to fulfil my life’s purpose. I beg you to choose a date in a month’s time for me to cry the death of my uncle and offer sacrifices to God to facilitate his entrance into the next world” (Ateh17). This decision of inheriting the ‘Abe Aboa’ and confirming to the Fon that, “I shall sacrifice to our ancestors” (Ateh21), proves a new dawn, that of cultural tolerance. Baba rather seems to be confused, for he does not understand how a priest of the Whiteman’s God will sacrifice goats and chickens. Ndong clarifies this by stating that, “it seems to me that the white men who came here confused their culture with the word of God. I intend to correct some of those things...” (Ateh 21). It is on these grounds that Fr Ndong accepts the indigenous songs and musical instruments of the people to replace the regular English and Latin songs. “The choir from Ningan intoned an entrance song which was accompanied by *chong* instrumentation. This was the first time the *chong* was played in a church in Kom” (Ateh28). Fr Ndong does not end. He also changed the regular dressing code of the priest and the mass servers. “Ndong dressed in one of Baba’s best *dallas*, moved in from the inner compound, preceded by four mass servers... they were all wearing hand-knitted traditional dresses made in Kom...” (Ateh29). To Ndong, dressing is something which should not matter, most especially when it is not a cause of disturbance and distraction in church. This incorporation of African tradition in the church is what Homi Bhabha describes as hybridity. According to Bhabha in *The Location of Cultures*, “hybridity is a space in which colonial and subaltern subjects can reverse binaries imposed by the colonial subject” (16). Hybridity therefore according to Bhabha is strength rather than a weakness as it reconciles oppositional binaries in a contact zone.

Another instance of hybridity in *Seat of Thorns* is the twin celebration at the Fon’s palace at Liakom, hosting the death celebration of Ndong’s uncle, Ndong’s coronation as the chief of Aboa and the baptism of the Fon. “Ndong decided with the organising committee of the event to prepare just one ceremony beginning with the Holy Mass and ending with his coronation and death celebration. The Fon and all those who wanted to be baptised would receive the sacrament...” (Ateh25). The entire community turned out to witness because they could not believe the possibility of such an event, given that the white church leaders like Fr Jensen and his predecessors have made the people believe that anything indigenous was pagan, and, should not be brought close to the church. Fr Ndong tells them that, “Today will mark a turning point in the church in this kingdom as the church shall fully embrace our tradition and will henceforth constitute an integral part of our daily lives in all our spiritual and physical undertakings” (Ateh29). It is in this same ceremony that Fr Ndong emphasise that:

From today, there will be no reason for us to take our dead to church and then return home to perform any ritual before burial. These rituals will be integrated into our

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

church service for all of them serve the same purpose; that of facilitating our passage into the next world. We shall consecrate our palm wine to change it into Christ's blood like we do with mass wine today..." (Ateh32).

This is total enculturation as the African burial rituals will be performed in the church as well as the integration of indigenous palm wine in church to substitute the mass wine. The incorporation of these local aspects into the church makes the church to be African as it matches the day-to-day lives of the people, making them feel included. Palm wine is sacred in the African cosmology and holds a significant place in traditional ceremonies, rites, and rituals. Bringing this local drink which is so cherished by the indigenes into the church implies Ndong's mastery of the potency of this liquor in not only uniting the people, but also linking them with their ancestors. Bringing these aspects of the Kom culture in church, especially the integration of the palm wine, "had become the most cherished part of the service and everybody came to church with his personal cup. They would not miss the church palm wine for they said it tasted sweeter than any other wine in the kingdom" (Ateh97). We realise the peace, unity and togetherness that reigns in the kingdom because of Ndong's capacity to blend the two cultures together.

Moreover, we still find the mixture of African culture and Catholic customs through the integration of some indigenous songs and musical instruments during mass. Francis Ateh narrates:

The 'Lord have mercy' and 'Gloria' were sung by the choir in the Kom language, using the tune of popular *njangkwein* in Kom. The songs again sounded so new and so exciting that all the congregation joined in and swayed from one side to the other to the rhythm of the beautiful drumming that accompanied the singing. At the end of the songs, Ndong made a long prayer still in the Kom language. As he finished, the sound of the *Atinge*, the beautiful palace juju that went to the funerals of notables, was heard from outside. The juju danced into the compound, followed by the instrumentalists who sat down in the middle of the compound and continued playing. As the juju danced, it was followed by one notable who was carrying the holy Bible in a raffia bag. He danced up to the altar and handed the Bible to the priest who himself raised it above his head and danced with it round the compound.... (Ateh 30)

Bearing in mind that the message of the Bishop after Ndong received his posting decision which calls on him not to dismiss all the customs and traditions of the people, as they can be integrated into the church, or modified to serve the Almighty, we see Ndong actually putting this into practice as he incorporates almost every positive aspect of the tradition of the people including the juju which is a sacred cult, the Kom language, indigenous musical instruments like the *Atinge*, the raffia bag, *dallas*, hand-knitted traditional regalia and others. All these

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

elements portray the hybrid nature of the church at Ningan which goes a long way to reconcile these two cultures.

Furthermore, we notice the potency of hybridity as it leads to progress and peace in the Kom community when Ndong together with the paramount Fon of Kom decide to organise a hybrid ritual ceremony before crops are planted. It should be noted that the month of May is set aside for planting in the Kom kingdom, and as such, the *Koh Ngang*, “which is one of the biggest sacrifices of the land,” (Ateh48) is organised to beg the gods for a rich harvest while in January to thank the gods for a successful year. Ndong in his double capacity as the priest of Ninang and the chief of Aboa is expected to participate in this ritual, where he as a chief will offer sacrifices to the gods of the land. The people believe that if this ritual is not performed, the harvest will be poor. The author asserts that:

Before the rituals started, Ndong asked the Fon for a chance to make a prayer... Ndong went on his knees and with his hands raised in supplication, prayed God to bless the Fon and all the leaders of the Kom land. He prayed for a rich harvest and many more births. He finally prayed for the success of the sacrifice of the night which he hoped would bring a rich harvest and more prosperity to the tire kingdom. Once he stopped, the high priest collected the *Abii* and drew out a series of complicated lines on the floor. He performed a few rituals as he whispered some secret incantations. The Fon took the floor and called the gods of the land and the ancestors to accept the sacrifice and bring prosperity to the land... (Ateh49-50)

Sacrifices are made by Africans for several reasons; to appease the gods, to thank the gods for a successful year, to beg for protection, to seek for a fruitful new year, to demand for blessings, and for more births etc. The rituals in this case were carried out to beg the gods for a rich harvest. However, the peculiarity of this one is that there was the association of Christianity and African traditional system of worship. Ndong felt so much satisfaction, and kept wondering, “why the early missionaries had completely refused to give any credence to the African system of worship. Today, he prayed to God through his ancestors and had the feeling that his prayers were more quickly answered” (Ateh 50). The outcome was rather outstanding, as the author narrates, “The harvest in Kom that year was the richest as far as their memories could take them. The Fon was convinced that Ndong’s participation at the *Koh Ngang* sacrifice was responsible for it. This reinforced his faith in God” (Ateh 50). This is evidence to justify that hybridity is strength rather than a weakness as it leads to prosperity and peace in the Kom society as seen in this novel. The results of this cultural *mélange* reunite the people of Kom and serves as a means of rewriting the wrongs created by the white missionaries in this community.

When Ndong is finally expelled from the Roman Catholic Church, he baptises his new church as ‘The Indigenous Church of God’ (Ateh 137). Judging from the name of this

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

church, we realise that a new era of Christianity is about to begin, as the church will freely and fully integrate all the positive aspects of the indigenous religion. This is confirmed when Ndong says, “Here we will praise God in accordance with the ways of our ancestors. Our sole guide will be God’s Holy Book, The Bible. We shall no longer pray through other’s ancestors as if ours have never seen God” (Ateh 137). This again attests the unbreakable bond that will now exist between the indigenous gods of the people and that of the Whiteman. Therefore, we see Ndong’s success in forging a wonderful marriage between these two cultures.

In *The White White Man of God*, there are also instances of hybridity. Tansa is an example of this trend as he blends Christianity and African traditional practices. Tansa is from a Christian family who do not partake in any rites, rituals, or sacrifices as they consider such practices as pagan and thus, evil. However, he participates in the sacrifice performed by the Fai in Mborn, where the blood of the sacrificial chicken was marked on his chest, and he ate the sacrificial meal. Pa Matiuis another replica of a blend between two cultures just like Tansa. Pa Matiu is the catechist of the parish at Nkah and he is also a member of the most dreaded juju of the land. The author asserts:

At about five o’clock the bell rang for Rosary and Benediction but nobody budged from his place to go church. Big Father put on his cassock and moved towards the church but it was the assistant catechist who had rung the bell not Pa Matiu. People would have gone to church but for the fact that the bell rang just when one of the jujus, in fact the most dreaded juju in the land, was coming...it was not easy to get people to go into church before the juju had come and danced and gone, and so in his fury Big Father decided to stop the juju from coming into the church premises... The kibarankoh is the blackest of the jujus and it has a very big head. It has only one big open mouth in the head which serves as eyes for the man who is in it. As such it cannot see anything coming by its side. Big Father approached it from the side so that it did not see him... Big Father kicked and kicked the Kibarankoh and when it turned round to him he pushed off its big mask and then got the shock of his life. Face to face with the juju he could not believe his eyes.

Mathew!

Father.

Mathew!

Father

Then he collapsed on the spot. (Jumbam143)

Despite being the catechist, we see that Pa Matiu is a member of the most dreaded juju in Nso. He is therefore a hybrid character as he blends Christianity and his culture. As a member of this cult, it entails that he actively participates in every “pagan” rite, ritual, and sacrifice which is performed in this community and still goes to church and performs his duties as the

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

catechist. We also see the intolerant behaviour of the whites demonstrated here by Big Father, who is unable to respect and tolerate the culture of this people. That is why he decides to confront the Kibarankoh by kicking it, and finally unmasking it. This is similar to the situation in *Things Fall Apart* as Enoch, the overzealous convert unmark the egwugwu.

Yaya in *The White Man of God* is also a model in the Nkah community due to her ability to blend the western culture and her indigenous culture. Despite rejecting every aspect of this new religion in favour of her African traditional religion, she finally accepts to be baptised. This is seen when she tells Tansa's father, "you may make that thing on me. 'What, Baptism?' 'Yes but make it yourself'" (Jumbam119). By accepting to be baptised, Yaya therefore blends these two cultures.

As seen in this section of the paper, a bond between the Whiteman and the Black man's religion leads to peace, unity, and fraternity among the people of the Kom and the Nso society as it reconciles the antagonism that has existed in these communities. The integration of the aspects of the people's culture into the church thus serves as a new opening to all African societies, as seen in these novels.

Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to question and reverse the European culture imposed on the Africans through Christianity as presented in *Seat of Thorns* and *The White Man of God*. Through the reading of these novels, we realised that, Catholicism is a religion which centres on aspects of the Eurocentric cultural codes, and thus, the church authorities do everything possible to implant this culture on the natives by rejecting the indigenous cultural practices of the people during church rituals. This is because when two oppositional forces come together, the tendency is for one to dominate the other. This leads to a clash between the indigenes of Nso and Kom and the church, as the former mount resistance against the latter. However, the analysis of these novels demonstrates that cultural blend is potent in reconciling cultural differences in multicultural societies. This is due to the fact that the integration of the people's culture and customs into church rituals makes this new religion more African, as the indigenes and the traditional authorities identify with the church since it reflects their own realities. Hybridity therefore becomes an uncountable element in forging an unbreakable bond between the indigenous gods of the people and that of the Whiteman, thereby creating a new model for Christianity in Africa. For instance, the creation of 'The Indigenous Church of God' at the end of *Seat of Thorns*, just like the creation of 'The Free Mosque Church of the Cross and the Crescent, at the end of *Chiliad* (Brink195), is a model of an ideal contemporary church which embraces positive aspects of the African religious system in church rituals.

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

Works Cited:

- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. London, Heinemann, 1958.
- Brink, André. *Philida*. London, Random House, Harvill Secker, 2012.
- Ateh, Francis. *Seat of Thorns*. Yaoundé: Nyaa Publishers, 2018.
- Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London, Routledge, 1994.
- *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London, Routledge, 1994.
- Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonialism and Postcolonial Literature*. Oxford, Oxford UP, 1995.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*, London: Pluto Press, 1962.
- Aidoo, Akosua, A. "Women in the History and Culture of Ghana," Research Review, Vol.1,1, Legon: Institute of African Studies, 1985, pp. 20
- Mda, Zakes. *The Heart of Redness*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2000.
- Janmohamed, Abdul. "The Economy of Manichean Allegory", in Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, London, Routledge, 1995. pp. 18-23.
- Jumbam, Kenjo. *The White Man of God*, Ibadan: Heinemann, 1980.
- Lye, John. "Some Issues in Postcolonial Theory", 1997. <https://brocku.ca/english/courses/4f70/postcol.php>, Accessed July 15th, 2023.
- Mbiti, John. *Akamba Stories*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism. Orientalism*. London, Routledge and Kegan, 1978.
- Tyson, Lois, *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. London, Routledge, 2008.
- Spivak, Gayatri, Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in Ashcroft, Bill, et al. eds. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, London, Routledge, 1995. pp. 24-8.
- Young, Robert, J. C. *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*. Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2001.