

SPIRITUALITY IN BLACK AFRICAN WRITING

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IN THE POPULAR VIEW, CHRISTIAN missionaries subverted indigenous African cultures from within. It is an opinion prompted by the critique of western ethnocentrism, by the separation of religion and culture in the West and by the reigning western theory of cultural relativism. The truth is exactly the opposite. Whatever their shortcomings, Christian missionaries placed great importance on speaking and recording the vernacular language which is the principal mechanism of culture. The decision to translate the Bible into the vernacular, to conduct religious education and to compose liturgical texts and hymns in the vernacular, not only created a mother-tongue literacy, but also prompted an indigenous cultural revival. The use of African names for God presupposed a dialogue between Christianity and African religion. It is no exaggeration to say that Christian missionaries made it possible for African cultural traditions to enter the history of world literature and thought.¹

Modern African creative writing is far from sympathetic to the Church. Indeed its message often appears essentially secular and addressed to a secularized élite. However, African writers do not neglect their people's religious experience. Moreover, they are deeply influenced by the impact of Christianity and by themes borrowed from the Bible or Christian hymnology. Even in their most impassioned criticism of the missionary, these writers bear witness to the cultural liberation which has been one of the consequences of Christian evangelization.

Indeed, one can go further and say that African creative writers share many of the Church's moral, social and spiritual concerns. This is not surprising, since adherence to Christianity was frequently a disguised form of nationalism and a critique of colonialism. Resistance culture and the literature of protest have many points of continuity with the popular, vernacular Christianity of Africa. It is therefore not unrealistic to discern a spirituality – explicit or implicit – in the contemporary literature of black Africa.

The late Camara Laye (1924–1981), a leading French-language novelist, was perhaps exceptional in being devoid of nationalist aspirations. He was born into the Malinke tribe of French Guinea. It was an

area remote from the centres of French colonialism, but with a veneer of Islam. In spite of this, it is noticeable that there is hardly a single reference to the Muslim religion in all his writings. Camara Laye went on to gain a French education and to become a motor mechanic. He was sent to France to study automobile and aeronautical engineering, and he remained there, working in car factories and in public transport companies, until 1956.

The experience of isolation from his African background, coupled with the even more profound alienation produced by his technological education, called forth his autobiographical novel *The African child*.² This is a work of penetrating spiritual reflection, made possible by his exile in France, and by his appreciation there of universal religious values. This autobiography of Camara Laye's childhood is a *pastorale* of great beauty, recreating an authentic vision of the world of African tradition. However, it is far from being a work of mere romanticism or nostalgia. On the contrary, it is a deeply religious book, the reinstatement of the author's inner world represented by his childhood. He evinces a powerful religious longing for this coherent universe of African village life.

Camara Laye paints a picture of a sacramental world, full of mystery and ceremony. A major theme is that of revelation through dreams and the importance of the subconscious in the growth of human awareness and sensibility. Another central theme is that of love – a love that is unassuming, filled with wonder and not at all exploitative. *The African child* reveals life as itself a rite of passage, and it brings out the religious awareness of the human being in transit through life. It is an awareness of, and an awakening to, final fulfilment.³

Still in France, Camara Laye published a second novel, *The radiance of the king*, in 1954.⁴ It is the story of a white man, called Clarence, seeking to enter the service of a mysterious African king. The book has a dream-like, Kafkaesque quality, which produces different responses in the reader. Indeed, there has been a controversy as to whether it is, or is not, a religious book.⁵ For the Christian reader there cannot be any doubt that it is a book about religion, as well as about the contradictions and paradoxes of life. The figure of the king is the epitome of power through weakness, a frail adolescent, 'full of sweetness', possessing a 'miraculous lightness' and a 'blazing purity'. No words can describe him. His love emanates from him like an irresistible fire that melts material structures. He represents for Clarence 'the end of all seekings', and the latter discovers in him his eternal and completely satisfying goal. Personalized absolutes of this kind can only refer to God.

The theological character of the book is also illustrated by the theme of faith. Clarence believes in the king from the start. His faith is continuously tested and grows stronger throughout his quest. In the end his faith in the eventual coming of the king is rewarded. Clarence goes to the king, naked and dispossessed, and his self-offering is accepted. His faith turns out, in fact, to be a divine gift, and he merges with the king, enfolded in his arms and enveloped forever.

Love – parental, filial, conjugal – is a recurring theme in the writing of Camara Laye. Although Clarence's essentially pure love for the king is never in doubt, he is obliged to learn how to integrate his sexuality, and even the physical aspects of sex, with this love. Like *The African child*, this book is also a rite of passage, in which Clarence is emptied of his prejudices, as his moral strength develops. It is also a story of personal relationships, of respect for, and self-discovery in, others. There has been much speculation about the identity of Clarence. On the surface he is a white man who is forced to consider the positive qualities of African culture, but he may also be a reverse symbol for the exiled Camara Laye, or perhaps for the whole of Black Africa. In any case, race is a barrier which the book purports to surmount. Like *The African child*, this book is also a narrative of restoration, of the recovery of lost identity. In the end, the king reveals the pattern of human fulfilment.⁶

Camara Laye's third book, *A dream of Africa*, was published twelve years later.⁷ It reflects the author's disillusionment after his return to Guinea, and his criticism of the country's newly independent regime. Before the book was published, his differences with the Guinean authorities led to exile in neighbouring Senegal, where he remained for the rest of his life. The book takes its stand on truth, goodness, justice, respect for human rights and religion. It evokes a final messianism, a future restoration. Finally, barely three years before his death, Camara Laye published his last work: *The guardian of the word*.⁸ The book consists of an essay introducing a collection of traditional prose-poem stories. For Camara Laye, the 'word' is the communication of truth, the perception of reality – a code word for the whole universe of signs that is culture. Africa is in danger of losing the 'word' because it is losing its religious vision and because it is closing itself to universal values. African rulers deal with their people 'as if they were cattle'. Only a few leaders are capable of restoring and reaffirming the African personality. This bitter realism is Camara Laye's testament to Africa and the world.

Wole Soyika (b. 1934), Africa's leading playwright and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, was born in western Nigeria. His university studies took place at Ibadan and Leeds, and his initiation in

the theatre at the Royal Court Theatre, London. Back in Nigeria after 1962, he pursued the career of a university teacher. During the Biafran war he was detained for alleged pro-Biafran sympathies, after which he published a prison diary.⁹ His output of plays, novels and poetry is both prodigious and outstanding in quality. Soyinka is a secular humanist who uses images and themes from Christianity and from his Yoruba ethnic religion to explore issues of life and leadership in contemporary Africa. In this article, we shall confine ourselves to a few of his more outstanding plays.

In his early plays, Soyinka is preoccupied with social change and he adopts a moral tone, warning the newly independent African nations of various dangers. *The swamp dwellers* (1961) depicts the African city with prophetic pessimism.¹⁰ It is a great brass monster that swallows up the younger generation. Those who succeed in the city are lost forever. They are, to all intents and purposes, dead. Those who fail are regurgitated into the surrounding swamps, the wastelands that the city has created in the rural areas. The naïve urban bias of the youngster is contrasted with the anti-urban despair he leaves behind him in the homeland, which he inevitably comes to share on his return. He is caught between 'one slough and another'. What is frightening is the effect which the city has on the peri-urban surroundings, on the human rejects it casts aside and above all on the dehumanized urban rich that it cherishes.

Into this spiritually barren scenario enters one of Soyinka's celebrated 'Christ-figures', a blind beggar who forces people to think again, and to contemplate the possibility of beneficial change. Like Christ, his feet are washed by a woman, and he is presented as morally superior to the superstitious exponents of traditional religion.

An even more striking 'Christ-figure' appears in *The strong breed* (1963).¹¹ He is Eman, a teacher and healer who is a stranger to the village. When the villagers pick on an idiot boy to be the ritual scapegoat or 'carrier' of evil from the village at a yearly festival, Eman can only prevent this cruelty by taking on the role of carrier himself. He is aware of belonging to a 'strong breed' of forefathers who were carriers before him, but his sacrifice is consciously modelled on that of Christ. Through his sacrifice, which causes him shock and remorse, Eman becomes a saviour, raising the action of the play to a spiritual level. Eman stands for the type of leader or social visionary that Africa needs.

In *The road* (1964), the main protagonist is 'Professor', a mad visionary who has turned his back on Christianity.¹² His search for immortality through the conquest of death takes place on the road, which – through the accidents that take place there – is a theatre of death, as well as an

instrument of progress. The road becomes an incarnation of the Yoruba divinity, Ogun, whom Soyinka compares to the Greek god Dionysos, creator and destroyer, and for whom the road accidents are sacrifices. Shot dead by one of his cronies, Professor exhorts his audience to 'be like the road'. The play seems to express Soyinka's growing disillusionment with Christianity as a solution to Africa's problems, and his conviction that Africans must take their destiny in their own hands. Henceforward, his plays take on a political, rather than a moral, character.

In *Kongi's harvest* (1967), Soyinka mercilessly satirizes Nkrumah's dictatorial regime in Ghana and other autocratic regimes which were beginning to arise in Africa.¹³ Kongi is a tyrant obsessed with power, who usurps the moral and religious authority of both Christianity and the Yoruba religion. He is a false messiah, concerned only with his messianic image, and with posing for 'Last Supper portraits'. The real harvest is not the traditional yam festival of the Yoruba, but a harvest of death and horror. Kongi turns out to be Herod, not Christ, and the decapitated head of his enemy is brought to him at the feast, instead of the sacred yam. The would-be Saviour is Daodu, whose challenge to Kongi in a *coup d'état* fails, thus underlining Soyinka's pessimism still further.

Madmen and specialists (1971) followed upon Soyinka's experience of the Biafran war.¹⁴ It is a devastating critique of military rule.¹⁵ The play demonstrates how unbridled power brutalizes the victims and dehumanizes the wielders of such power. Dr Bero is a medical doctor turned secret serviceman and cannibal, who typifies the negation of all that is human. His barren *credo* is based on the Christian doxology: 'As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be'. It is the perversion of all ideology, the assertion that meaningless violence is the only key to human history. The play ends with Bero killing his own father because he is 'the last proof of the human in him'. In many ways, *Madmen and specialists* is Soyinka's darkest play. It is a terrible commentary on the abuse of power by rulers in Africa.

In 1973 Soyinka published both a play, *The Bacchae of Euripides* and a novel, *Season of anomy*. The first, as its name implies, is an African reinterpretation of the play by Euripides, while the second is a retelling of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.¹⁶ Soyinka borrows themes and symbols from ancient Greece in order to introduce a new element into his socio-political critique. Henceforward, he believes, change cannot come only from within. There is need for commitment to an external struggle.

In more recent years, Soyinka has gone over much of the same ground, returning to the conflict between colonial and traditional

values, and also to the experiences of his own childhood.¹⁷ This is not the place to attempt an appraisal of his superlative literary and dramatic skills, but rather to underline his deep humanitarian commitment and his implacable opposition to tyranny and the abuse of human rights. Although he is no longer convinced of the relevance of Christian teachings, his commitment to social justice is recognizably Christian.¹⁸

East Africa's leading writer, the Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o (b. 1938), is perhaps the greatest paradox in contemporary African creative writing. He is the strongest and most vehement critic of Christianity and yet he is the writer most influenced by the Bible and by Christian images and themes. Although he is a self-confessed Marxist, he accepts that he is a religious writer because he is interested in the interaction of people's 'hidden lives' with the social reality.¹⁹ He is, in spite of himself, a living witness to the renaissance of indigenous culture, triggered by missionary evangelization in Africa.

Ngugi is a member of the Kikuyu tribe in Kenya. He received a Protestant schooling in Kenya and then studied at Makerere University, Uganda, and afterwards at the University of Leeds in Britain. On his return to Kenya, he joined the Literature Department of Nairobi University, of which he was subsequently the head. In 1977–1978 he was detained 'for activities and utterances dangerous to the good government of Kenya and its institutions'. Since 1979 he has lived in exile in Britain.

Ngugi published his first novel, *Weep not child*, in 1964.²⁰ The story was set at the time of the Mau Mau conflict in Kenya (1952–1960), when Ngugi was in his early teens. It explored the impact of Mau Mau on different types of people. It was followed in 1965 and 1967 by two works of greater maturity. *The river between* is set in the colonial period before Mau Mau, when missionaries were challenging Kikuyu female circumcision.²¹ The story, which is one of considerable literary beauty, concerns a compromise between human love and tribal loyalty that ends in failure. *A grain of wheat* described the aftermath of Mau Mau and the anomaly of the newly elected chief who is a self-confessed traitor.²² Other less important works followed until, in 1970, Ngugi published a collection of essays, entitled *Homecoming*, in which he publicly repudiated his Christian allegiance and his baptismal name.²³

Ngugi now became convinced that his art must be subordinated to his political message, the portrayal of Kenya's independent government as a betrayal of Mau Mau. His style of writing was also influenced by his new interest in vernacular language and literature. A play, *The trial of Dedan Kimathi*, which he co-authored with Micere Mugo in 1976, was an

'apotheosis' of Mau Mau.²⁴ The following year saw the appearance of a lengthy novel, completed in Russia with the help of the Soviet Writers' Union, *Petals of blood*.²⁵ The novel is a pastiche, in which the plot all but disappears amidst a series of poems, songs and political harangues. In 1977, Ngugi was the producer of a play in the Kikuyu language, written together with Ngugi wa Mirii, entitled *I will marry when I want*.²⁶ It was published in English in 1982, after his release from detention. The play was a satire aimed at capitalism and Christianity in Kenya and seems to have been directly responsible for his imprisonment. In prison, Ngugi wrote a savage, satirical allegory, entitled *Devil on the cross*, directed again at Christianity and capitalism. This appeared in the Kikuyu language in 1980, and in English in 1982.²⁷ During the 1980s Ngugi published several works of literary criticism, among them *Writers in politics* (1981) and *Barrel of a pen* (1984).²⁸

Ngugi's antipathy to white colonialists is summed up in his dictum: 'A foreigner can never become the true guide of another people'. The relationship between European and African is symbolized by the stereotypes of Prospero and Caliban, and of Crusoe and Friday. As a Marxist, Ngugi sees colonialism as an outcome of the class conflict in Europe. After political independence, the black neo-colonialists replaced the white colonialists. Ngugi assumes the class struggle to be unending. Colonialism and neo-colonialism are functions of 'international monopoly capitalism', imaged by Ngugi as a form of cannibalism, or as the worship of the golden calf. It is a universal conspiracy which encompasses every known form of human wickedness. Ngugi believes that liberation from this evil will bring about human rejuvenation.

Ngugi looks forward somewhat uncertainly to a time when the patriotic culture of peasants and workers will be the culture of all, in a classless millennium. Nevertheless, he emphasizes the need for a multi-ethnic national culture in Kenya. In spite of the Kikuyu setting which he gives his stories, Ngugi claims that there is no future for tribal cultures. The past is not important. What matters is the present reality of the liberation struggle. Culture, for Ngugi, is a resistance culture, needing an ever-present colonial enemy. Mau Mau was the heroic age, the single interpretative principle of Kenyan history, and universal values are abhorrent – even meaningless – to him. The enemy has no culture.

The *raison d'être* of true literature, according to Ngugi, is the unmasking of the capitalist enemy. He is not interested in problems of passion, compassion or conscience, even though *The river between* transmits its message through a moving love story. There are many revenge killings

and sacrificial deaths in his pages, but little reflection on the transcendent value of suffering or of death itself. The dead have no place in the promised utopia, nor is there any future role for literature. The absence of the comic muse also means that an essential ingredient is lacking from Ngugi's vision of liberated humanity.

Mau Mau spread its message through poetry and song. Ngugi has decided to do the same. Mau Mau has disguised its meaning by taking over biblical images and Christian hymns. Ngugi does likewise. The Mau Mau movement thus becomes the pattern for a national literary style.

In spite of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's patently naïve Marxism, there is little in his social doctrine with which a Christian could not agree. He denounces every form of hypocrisy. He shares the Catholic Church's condemnation of artificial contraception, and sees it as yet another form of western exploitation. Ngugi's attack on capitalism becomes a theological critique of consumerism and luxurious living. Ngugi preaches asceticism and abnegation. It is clear that he is no materialist, and that he has a religious vision of society. However, in common with other Marxists, Ngugi fails to see that, even after the social revolution, human beings will still be cowardly, egotistical, cruel and power-hungry.

In one respect, however, Ngugi's social teaching constitutes a challenge to the Church, and this is in his championship of the rights of women. His stories are filled with heroic female characters, whose personal liberation becomes a symbol for the total liberation of all the oppressed.

Although Ngugi has repudiated belief in God and in the divinity of Jesus Christ, he has no difficulty in accepting Jesus as an historical figure. For him, Jesus is the archetypal revolutionary – a 'freedom-fighter Christology' that is not borne out by the Gospels. He praises the preferential option for the poor and the basic communities of the early Church, but he is in two minds about inculturation, preferring on the whole to see it as yet another piece of religious hypocrisy.

Although he complains that Christians do not live up to their ideals, Ngugi seems to believe that New Testament ideals are fundamentally flawed. The preaching of humility, forgiveness and non-violence is an insult to the oppressed. He turns the Sermon on the Mount into an unhealthy idealization of suffering, and claims that the parables are a direct encouragement towards social injustice. In fact, Ngugi has no real interest in the Christ of faith. He is more interested in the false God that he believes Christians really worship, the Devil of Ngugi's theology – capitalism. *Devil on the cross* parodies the eucharist, the crucifixion and the

resurrection in order to demonstrate how Christianity has become a front for colonialism. The real malice of Christianity is that it educated Kenyans into submission by deceitful methods. Ngugi also links the Church with the African slave trade.

In spite of his tirades, Ngugi owes a great deal to Christianity for his own religious vision of humanity and for the terms and images in which he expresses this vision. The Bible played an important part in Ngugi's early education, and the revival was also an early influence in his life. Although he claims that he is imitating Mau Mau in his use of Christian images, such symbols have a unique power derived from their own traditional matrix. It is not surprising that when they are applied to other contexts they should imbue them with unexpected religious meaning. It would seem that Ngugi is not wholly unaware of this.

It is natural that the biblical themes of messianism and exodus should appeal to Ngugi. He also makes play with the opposition of 'Christ' and 'Judas' in his fictional characters. Dedan Kimathi, the hero of Mau Mau, is a Christ-figure who undergoes an agony and a passion and who is nominally resurrected in his followers. Even the people of Kenya are a collective Christ, betrayed, crucified and resurrected. The movement of *Petals of blood* parallels the life of Christ, and his journey up to Jerusalem. The way to death and the way to life meet in Christ, as they do in the actions of every human person.

Ngugi is certainly writing about love and hate, but these are defined by the class-struggle. Forgiveness is a dangerous weakness and violent revenge is idealized. Ngugi believes that out of violence will be born a nobler courage and a more beautiful love. In detention, however, Ngugi seems to have discovered that suffering can be redemptive and that the class struggle has little relevance for detainees. It is one of the weaknesses of Marxist theory that the revolutionary utopia is snatched from those who give their lives in its cause, but, according to Ngugi, martyrs (like J. M. Kariuki) are resurrected in those who continue the struggle in their name.

The resurrected nation will be a nation of warriors, carrying out an eternal Mau Mau. In so far as Ngugi enunciates a positive ideal for his utopia, it is couched in terms of truthful communication between human beings. It is also depicted in the biblical terms of a new creation – 'a new heaven and a new earth'. Ngugi believes in a moral regeneration, when slavery and social inequality will be at an end. Humanity will create its own heaven and will take on the nature of God. In fact, the God whom Ngugi worships is 'the fighting God in us – the oppressed ones'.

Although he offers no clear picture of his utopian goal, although he offers no really practical guidance on how to bring it about, and although the Church he rejects is a parody of the reality, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's world vision is ultimately religious and eschatological. Its basic flaw is the belief that human beings can aspire to become divine through their own efforts.²⁹

NOTES

¹ This is the view of a distinguished African scholar. Cf Lamin Sanneh, *Encountering the West* (London, 1993).

² Camara Laye, *The African child* (Glasgow, 1964), first published as *L'enfant noir* (Paris, 1953).

³ Alphonse Timira, 'Religious themes in *The African child* of Camara Laye', *CHIEA: African Christian Studies*, Occasional Paper 2, (June 1985), pp 8-14.

⁴ Camara Laye, *The radiance of the king* (Glasgow, 1965), first published as *Le regard du roi* (Paris, 1954).

⁵ Cf David Cook, 'The relevance of the king in Camara Laye's *Le regard du roi*' in C. Heywood (ed), *Perspectives on African literature* (London, 1971), p 143; and Wole Soyinka, *Myth literature and the African world* (Cambridge, 1976), p 124.

⁶ Aylward Shorter and Gabriel Ukwong, 'Theology without dogma in Camara Laye's *Radiance of the king*', *CHIEA: African Christian Studies*, Occasional Paper 2 (June 1985), pp 2-7.

⁷ Camara Laye, *A dream of Africa* (Glasgow, 1970), first published as *Dramouss* (Paris, 1966).

⁸ Camara Laye, *The guardian of the word* (Glasgow, 1980), first published as *Le maître de la parole* (Paris, 1978).

⁹ Wole Soyinka, *The man died* (London, 1972).

¹⁰ *The swamp dwellers* in Wole Soyinka, *Collected plays* vol 1 (Oxford, 1973), pp 79-112.

¹¹ *The strong breed* in Wole Soyinka, *Collected plays* vol 1 (Oxford, 1973), pp 113-146.

¹² *The road* in Wole Soyinka, *Collected plays* vol 1 (Oxford, 1973), pp 147-232.

¹³ *Kongi's harvest* in Wole Soyinka, *Collected plays* vol 2 (Oxford, 1974), pp 59-142.

¹⁴ *Madmen and specialists* in Wole Soyinka, *Collected plays*, vol 2 (Oxford, 1974), pp 215-276.

¹⁵ Paradoxically, it was performed at the National Theatre, Kampala, where the author saw it in 1972, at the height of Idi Amin Dada's cruel military regime in Uganda.

¹⁶ Wole Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides* in *Collected plays* vol 1 (Oxford, 1973), pp 233-307; *Season of anomy* (Oxford, 1973).

¹⁷ Wole Soyinka, *Death and the king's horseman* (London, 1975); *Ake: the years of childhood* (London, 1981).

¹⁸ The section on Wole Soyinka owes much to a BA Working Paper which I supervised in 1981: 'Wole Soyinka: the social visionary', by the late Wandera Chagenda (photocopy of typescript), University of Bristol, Department of Theology and Religious Studies.

¹⁹ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Homecoming* (London, 1972), p 31.

²⁰ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Weep not child* (London, 1964).

²¹ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *The river between* (London, 1965).

²² Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *A grain of wheat* (London, 1967).

²³ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Homecoming* (London, 1972).

²⁴ Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo, *The trial of Dedan Kimathi* (London, 1976).

²⁵ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of blood* (London, 1977).

²⁶ Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii, *I will marry when I want* (London, 1982).

²⁷ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Devil on the cross* (London, 1982).

²⁸ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Writers in politics* (London, 1981); *Barrel of a pen* (London, 1984).

²⁹ The section on Ngugi wa Thiong'o is largely based on: Aylward Shorter, 'Christianity and the theology of African resistance' in *CHIEA: African Christian Studies*, Occasional Paper 2 (June 1985), pp 15-31.