

Eldership, Ancestral Traditions and Cultural Identity in African Fiction: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments* Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost*
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Abstract

This paper explores the place and significance of the representations of eldership and ancestral traditions in African fiction. It argues that what the examples located within the selected texts discussed are not merely co-incidental, but collectively represent and articulate an engagement in a discourse of African cultural and spiritual rehabilitation. Examples are chosen from the work of three of Africa's most prominent and well-known writers to illustrate the argument that is being made, which is that when Africans refer to their ancestral traditions, they do so both as a form of commemoration and also as a means of establishing their belief and faith in age-old spiritual traditions.

How will he find his around this dark place should the ghost of one of our forefathers pay us a visit? (Aidoo 1965: 13)

I myself am lost here a stranger unable to find a home in a town of strangers. (Armah 1970: 279)

Aspects of eldership and the role of the ancestors in relation to cultural identity in African fiction are much underlooked and undervalued, but are nevertheless central to the whole project of African renaissance and self-rehabilitation.¹ Early novels and narratives within the tradition of African narrative fiction reveal the presence of the elders and ancestors in the African imagination in ways that demonstrates their importance within African society. Very early on in Chinua Achebe's novel of African self-reclamation *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, we encounter the theme of African eldership. The "founder of the town" in reference to the originator of the Igbo town of Umuofia, who is presented as part of the mythic and legendary traditions of conquest of the Igbo people, and who is said to have "engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights" (Achebe 1986:3). represents a venerable ancestor worthy of remembrance and commemoration.

Ancestral commemoration is a fairly common tradition within both pre-colonial and post-colonial African societies. The Akan people of Ghana, the West African neighbours of the Igbo people for example, have very elaborate traditions such as the *Akwasidae* festival, which has a major feature the memorialisation of their departed ancestors. Although Umuofia's founder is referred to seemingly merely in passing and only fleetingly and invoked in cultural memory only as part of the larger narrative of Okonkwo's masculine prowess and his virility - as proven in his defeat of the great warrior Amalinze the Cat - the "founder's" leadership role is one that is very important. One could argue that other leadership roles are reproduced in different forms throughout the narrative of *Things Fall Apart*.

Later in the story, we encounter several other references to Umuofia's elders - some ancestors - as, for instance at the moment also fairly early in the story when Okonkwo's achievements are been lauded:

Okonkwo's prosperity was visible in his household. He had a large compound enclosed by a thick wall of red earth. His own hut, or *obi*, stood immediately behind the only gate in the red walls... Near the barn was a small house, the 'medicine house' or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits. He worshiped them with sacrifices of kola nut, food and palm-wine, and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives and eight children. (Achebe 1986: 10)

This passage provides an indication of the importance of departed elders and ancestors within Okonkwo's imagination. When he prays, he does not do so only to his "personal gods," but also to his "ancestral spirits," seeking their benefaction not only upon himself but upon his entire household. Okonkwo's quest for blessings from his ancestors and the belief that they actually have a role to play in the lives of the Igbo is not a ritual practice or tradition restricted to him. There is enough indication throughout the narrative of *Things Fall Apart* that the Igbo's believe in the communion between the world of the living and that of the dead or departed and even the unborn. We learn, for example that:

The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors.

There was coming and going between them, especially at festivals and also when

an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors. (Achebe 1986: 87)

Consequently, for instance, when people seek economic or material progress within the community and consult Agbala the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves, they encounter their departed ancestors. The consultation of the Oracles within Umuofia and other Igbo traditions demonstrates a strong connection of the Igbo with their ancestral world:

The Oracle was called Agbala, and people came from far and near to consult it. They came when misfortune dogged their steps or when they had a dispute with their neighbours. They came to discover what the future held for them *or to consult the spirits of their departed fathers* (Achebe 1986: 12; emphasis added)

When Okonkwo's indolent and impoverished father Unoka goes, for example, "to find out why he always had a miserable harvest" (Achebe 1986: 12), he is told that his connection with his ancestors is weak because he is a lazy man:

'Hold your peace! Screamed the priestess, her voice terrible as it echoed through the dark void, 'you have offended neither the gods nor your fathers. And when a man is at peace with his gods and his ancestors, his harvest will be good or bad according to the strength of his arm. You, Unoka are known in all the clan for the weakness of your machete and your hoe (Achebe 1986; p. 13)

Irrespective of Unoka's proven laziness, the point is that he belongs to a cultural system in which the place and value of the ancestors is important. In conversation with Okoye, the titled elder of the land who is his friend, they talk about "many things" including the next "ancestral feast" (Achebe 196; p. 5). If the Umuofians like other Igbos have an ancestral feast, then it is testimony to the fact that they hold their ancestors in very high regard. It is important to read this consultation of the oracle and the attitude of the Umuofians towards the "spirits of their departed fathers" as a practice and ritual that is integrated within their religious and spiritual cosmology, proving beyond any doubt that they had a system of seeking divine guidance; and one directly related to the Igbo belief in their God Chukwu as evident, for example, in the discussion that Mr Akunna will have with Mr Brown later on in the story.

The connection between the living and the dead and the place of African Ancestorhood within Igbo culture is evident throughout the narrative of *Things Fall Apart*. As a result, for instance, when Okonkwo offends the Earth Goddess Ani, Ezeani by beating his wife Ojiugo during the Week of Peace, otherwise known as “the sacred week” (Achebe 1986: 21), Ezeani “the priest of the earth goddess, Ani” (Achebe 1986: 22) does not mince in words in castigating Okonkwo. First of all when he is customarily offered kola upon his visit to Okonkwo, he rejects the offer stating:

Take away your kola nut. I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors...’Listen to me he said...You are not a stranger in Umuofia. You know as well as I do that our forefathers ordained that before we plant any crops in the earth we should observe a week in which a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbour (Achebe 1986: 21)

The ancestors or “forefathers” have a purposeful place etched in the minds of the Umuofians.

All of the prior background narrative on the place of ancestors within the Igbo community is to make and develop a wider point about the significance of eldership and the broader religious or spiritual significance of the close bonds between the Igbo and other African people and their ancestors. In a moment of deep reflection, Okonkwo contemplates the consequences of his son Nwoye’s joining of the Christian missionaries:

To abandon the gods of one’s father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination. Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye’s steps and abandon their ancestors? Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect of annihilation. He saw himself and his father crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days, and his children the while praying to the white man’s god. If such a thing were ever to happen, he, Okonkwo, would wipe them off the face of the earth. (Achebe 1986: 110)

Okonkwo’s anger at the “white man’s god” is not misdirected at all. It simply expresses a desire to stay closely affiliated to one’s culture and points to his awareness in the historical moment and age in which he lives and within which the narrative of Achebe’s

Umuofia Igbo unfolds that the colonial culture and its religion have devastating consequences for African cultural identity. Okonkwo is angry at the deracination of African traditions and at the steady and systematic erosion of African cultural values represented – in his view - in his son Nwoye’s defection to and embracement of the new religion that is the Christianity of the colonizing power. The usurpation of aspects of Igbo cultural life and spirituality, which Okonkwo imagining himself as an ancestor sees, as the “abandon[ment] of the gods of one’s father” and the recourse to “praying to the white man’s god” articulates what Amilcar Cabral describes as the repression of “the cultural life of the colonized people, either by so-called assimilation of indigenous people” or by “dividing or...deepening the divisions in the society” (Cabral 1994: 57) of the colonized.

Cabral’s argument, couched largely in Marxian or Marxist socialist terms deals largely with economic and political struggle within African movements seeking freedom and liberation from colonial rule. While not specifically addressing questions of religion or spirituality, it is nonetheless highly relevant and applicable. Religion, for example, may be seen as an aspect of culture and Cabral argues that culture as “the product of history...plunges its roots into the physical reality of the environmental humus in which it develops” and “reflects the organic nature of the society” (Cabral 1994: 550).

Okonkwo clearly sees the prior organic religious set-up of his society disintegrate, hence his angst. In the passage cited above, Okonkwo envisages the possibility of a future where his house is divided, and where “all his male children” led by Nwoye have “abandon[ed] their ancestors” himself included. Okonkwo cannot contemplate this “terrible prospect of annihilation,” where he and “his father crowding “round their ancestral shrine [are] waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice.” It is not particularly surprising in this regard, given his belief in a personal and communally validated system of reverence and worship, which is equivalent to the pre-colonial religious and spiritual order of Umuofia as a subset of Igbo cultural identity that Okonkwo has irreversible faith in is his local belief system. It is for this reason that Okonkwo is one the fiercest resistors of the onslaught of colonial rule in Igboland, especially that aspect of it that manifests through Christian proselytizing.

Modern Christianized Africans of whom Nwoye may be said to be symbolic often view conversion to Christianity as a movement from a primitive past into an advanced

and civilised future. While several pre-colonial contact historically relevant African traditions that venerate ancestors persist even today, the majority of Christianized Africans believe they have bought into a more progressive form of cultural identity and distance themselves from such celebrations. Many are unaware of the debilitating effects of what Aime Cesaire describes as “Christian pedantry” (Cesaire 2000: 33). Cesaire castigates “Christian pedantry, which laid down the dishonest equations *Christianity = civilisation, paganism = savagery*, from which there could not but ensue abominable colonialist and racist consequences, whose victims were to be” (Cesaire 1972: 33) Africans mainly as well as others.

Okonkwo’s torment and indeed his entire acts of severe opposition to the invading Christian culture in Achebe’s historical narrative of African self-assertion may also be read in terms of what Ngugi describes in *Decolonising the Mind* as “the great struggle between the two mutually opposed forces in Africa today: an imperialist tradition on one hand, and a resistance tradition on the other” (Ngugi: 1986 2). Okonkwo is entirely in his right to put up his own form of resistance. It is a sign of his author’s own critical consciousness and indeed that of some of the generation of African writers that Achebe grew up with that they are aware of the deleterious effects of colonial culture on the minds of Africans. At the point in the story of Umuofia and Igboland when Okonkwo is ruminating on his future role as an ancestor, his people have already been told that: “All the gods you have named are not gods at all. They are gods of deceit...Your gods are not alive” (Achebe 1986 : 105). Tsenedy Serequeberhan’s argument on European pseudo-humanism is most relevant here. He points out that behind:

the modern tradition of Western philosophy as a whole—lies the *singular* and grounding metaphysical belief that European humanity is properly speaking isomorphic with the humanity of the human *as such*. Beyond all differences and disputes this is the common thread that constitutes the unity of this tradition. (Serequeberhan 1991: 7; original emphases)

It is this same philosophical dispensation that subtends the proselytizing activities of the Christian missionaries in Igboland, who view only their gods as real gods and everyone else’s as false. It is perhaps not surprising then that Okonkwo having heard

them speak takes the view that the members of the new invading Christian religion are simply “mad” (Achebe 1986: 106).

The argument being made here consequently is that the presence of African ancestral traditions in African narrative fiction is no mere co-incidence; but part of an important project of African cultural reaffirmation and a form of counter-penetrative cultural and ideological decolonization.

In Ayi Kwei Armah’s 1969 novel *Fragments* Naana, Baako’s grandmother has an important role to play with regard to this theme of eldership and/or ancestorship. Speaking in reference to the ancestors, Naana presented as a deeply philosophical character refers to “those gone before” and the “words and actions they have left to guide us on our circular way” (Armah 1970: 4-5).

That circular way, directly related to the theme of African spirituality and the relationship between those living, those dead and even those yet unborn, the novel suggests, is in severe danger of being broken. For example, as she nears the moment when she will transition into the ancestral world Naana laments that:

The larger meaning which lent sense to every small thing and every momentary happening years and years ago has shattered into a thousand and thirty useless pieces. Things have passed which I have never seen whole, only broken and twisted against themselves. What remains of my days will be filled with more broken things. (Armah 1970: 280)

Naana is lamenting the loss of age-old and time worn cultural values, values laid down through the lives that preceding-elders-now-turned-ancestors lived. These elders laid down elaborate and time-proven cultural values and the laws they that their communities were meant to abide by.

In her intermediary and interlocutory roles in *Fragments* the character Naana is presented as one of the last living examples of a previously more morally conscientious society, whose ancestors of a long time ago would be sad to contemplate the present state of affairs. Naana has witnessed in her lifetime – as fictionally re-presented in the course of the narrative – her Ghanaian society’s degeneration into a crude and crass sort of materialism, a love and adulation of money with an attendant loss of spiritual values

that has triggered multiple forms of cultural alienation. Part of the lamenting Naana's frustration in her own words is that:

I was powerless before the knowledge that I had come upon strangers worshipping something new and powerful beyond my understanding, which made all the old wisdom small in people's minds, and twisted all things natural to the service of some newly created god" (Armah 1970: 284).

Those being described as "strangers" by Naana are the members of her own family and the wider Ghanaian post-independent society. Naana's anxieties here resonate somewhat with Okonkwo's and both protagonists are presented in this respect, like their authors, as defenders of African culture – even if their respective specific cultures are linguistically different.² Both Okonkwo and Naana very clearly feel a similar sense of alienation and loss.

Contrast their attitudes with that of a member of the present generation, Efua, who accosts her son Baako in *Fragments* for dressing too simply. The significant moment is when Baako is asked to be Master of Ceremonies for his sister Araba's child's outdooring:

"Anyway," she said, "you know you're the M.C. today."

"Yes. What do I have to do?"

"I am not the one who has been abroad to a university," his mother said, smiling full into his face.

"What I went to learn was different," he said.

"Well, there won't be too much to do. I wish you had brought a tux, or at least a suit, though. It would have been so fine."

"I'm not an ape."

"What a strange thing to say!" his mother said.

"Why else would I wear tuxes and suits in this warm country except to play monkey to the white man?"

“But for a sacred ceremony like this...”

“I suppose your sacred ancestors laid down the word that we should sweat in stupid suits and tuxes for such ceremonies.” Too bad. I’m going to wear clothes that won’t choke me.”

“Oh Baako,” his mother said, with real hurt in her voice, “I was only thinking of the best. Baako what happened to you?”

“What do you mean?”

Another scene in the novel shows characters suffocating in woollen suits and other stifling clothes. Naana is disgusted with those in her society “so busy” with “reaching after new things and newer ways to consume them.” She “understand[s]” them and her world “no more” and will only find peace in the ancestral world, of which she affirms: “I am coming where there is understanding to give a tired spirit rest” (Armah 1970: 283). It is significant that Naana’s grandson Baako, also presented as culturally conscious and with a decolonized mentality, in his critical riposte to his mother, makes reference to the ancestors, who would not have tolerated that colonized mental attitude.

Cultural redemption will come from self-rediscovery and *Fragments*’ reference to the ancestors provides further elaboration on how this might be achieved. Before Baako, the central protagonist of the novel travels abroad, tradition and custom demand that libation be poured to the ancestors of his family to ensure that they offer him protection and guidance on his journey. Baako’s uncle Foli is elected to pour the libation, but the entire process is overseen by Baako’s grandmother Naana, who is ultimately closest to the old traditions and more knowledgeable in that respect. Prayers are said for him seeking “the protection of the old ones gone before” (Armah 1970: 5) in a direct reference to Baako’s departed ancestors, whom his grandmother Naana will soon be joining.

This is the way the ancestors are beseeched when blessings are sought for Baako:

Watch over him, fathers

Watch over him

and let him prosper

there were he is going.
And when he returns
let his return, like rain,
bring us your blessings and their fruit,
your blessings
your help
in this life you have left us to fight alone
with your wisdom (Armah 1970: 9).

Baako's ancestors are being reminded not to neglect their duty to Baako and to the rest of the community. Simultaneously it is emphasized to Baako's hearing that he should not be "become persuaded" to think that he "walk[s] alone" because "[t]here are no humans born alone." Libation, which pays tribute to and testifies to the presence of the ancestors within African life is also form of both individual and communal commemoration. African ancestral libation and prayer consequently forms part of that "traditional verbal art" that it has to be "kept in mind" in terms of "the meaning of its content... makes its overriding purpose the remembrance of the history of a people" (Armah 2006: 151).

This instantiation within the narrative of African verbal art forms via a re-presented pouring of libation or culturally redemptive prayer is an important way of affirming the validity of African oral traditions within knowledge production. Armah himself has argued, for instance that: "in the colonial context, these traditions were treated as separate entities," and "fixed in a timeless ahistoricity" to the point where contemporary African literature of which the novel under discussion *Fragments* itself is an apposite example, is "mistaken for something newly created" and "given a European paternity" (Armah 2006: 146).

Consequently it matters not in the wider scheme of things, as we have seen that Baako's uncle Foli is of questionable character himself. The cyclical relationship between the world of the living and that of the dead is already established. Foli is said to have:

kept the spirits waiting like begging children for the drink of their own libation and, thirsty drunkard that he has always been, even when at last he began to pour it out he only let go of little miserly drops, far from enough to end the long thirst of a single one of those gone before....Sly like a thief he was measuring the bottle in his soul. The less he poured out to end the thirst of the ghosts the more the bottom would hold for his own dry mouth (Armah 1970: 5-6).

Naana has a genuine fear that Foli's avaricious attitude and his "greed for drink was allowed to break the circle and to spoil the perfect beauty of the libation." It is imperative for Baako not only to thrive and "prosper" abroad; his return must also be of benefit to the community. His uncle Foli's prayer will ensure that that. In supplicating the ancestors they must be given their due for leaving their descendants with their "wisdom." The words uttered by uncle Foli are age-old words that are part and parcel of the Akan tradition of ritual libation pouring. It should be borne in mind though that Armah is on record as espousing a pan-African identity to which he feels more affiliated, which he elaborates in *The Eloquence of the Scribes*. Of his craft as a writer, for example, he has stated:

I began by identify the matter of my craft. I would write about Africa. This meant that I would be writing against the prevailing currents of colonial literary scholarship and writing, whose preferred mode of consciousness was fragmented, tribal, national (read colonial) or regional, but definitely not African in any integral sense. The kind of narrative that interested me was not the narrative of any tribe (Armah 2006: 141)

This declaration notwithstanding, a majority of Armah's works espouse and articulate an Akan cultural ethos. Indeed, the novel under discussion *Fragments*, has each chapter named by specific Akan words, which all have deep cultural significance. Naana, the Akan-Fante word for grandmother has two Chapters 1 and 13 titled after her. Other chapter names include Chapter 4 "Awo," which means "birth" in Akan and Chapter Chapter 9 "Dam," which means "madness." So to speak, there is a self-conscious grounding of the novel within an Akan literary aesthetic, which counter-acts the

assertion by Armah of no affiliation to a tribal identity. The word “tribal” is problematic as colonial linguistic construct, but that is a debate for another occasion.

Fragments reiterates the point made earlier in the discussion about belief in the African world view of a constant link between the living and the dead. Foli soliciting protection for Baako from the ancestors addresses them thus:

Where you are going
go softly,
Nananom
You who have gone before
See that his body does not lead him
into snares made for the death of spirits. (Armah 1970: 5)

“Nananom “the Akan word for ancestors or departed forefathers of the clan is an important commemorative register within the story. If we consider that Armah dedicates two whole chapters especially the first and the last in the narrative to Naana, Baako’s grandmother, who is herself on the way to ancestorhood, it brings further to mind how very important that theme is within the narrative.

The content of Foli’s libation suggests that the ancestors are central to the definition of African spirituality. The ancestors “who have gone before” are invoked and supplicated to ensure that Baako’s “body does not lead him...into snares made for the death of spirits” (Armah 1970: 5). As Ephirim - Donkor has observed of African attitudes to ancestorship in his work on ancestorship and African spiritual values: “the elders are convinced that whenever they convene, the ancestors are in their midst as witnesses. This is to ensure that everything said and done is carried out in spirit and truth” (Ephirim - Donkor 1997: 125)

Fragments develops this theme of eldership, making Naana one of its most important characters in terms of ideological and mental decolonization. The suggestion is that she represents an older order, which was full of wiser ways for the community and its people. This theme is pushed and developed in relation to her proximity to attaining an ancestral status. The idea being communicated here is that the ancestors have previously lived in the world and have handled it much better. If the idea is that

African societies and communities can live a much better existence, then the role ascribed to Naana and other protagonist with similar dispositions in African fiction must be seen as a central part of the African writer's quest to project and affirm an identity that manifests freedom from colonial and neo-colonial ideological indoctrination and domination.

The theme of the better values of a previous generation is again present in Ama Ata Aidoo's play *The Dilemma of a Ghost*. Nana the grandmother in Aidoo's play is the voice-on-earth of the ancestors, occupying as she does that liminal space between the world of the living and the dead. She is a custodian of the time-tested progressive tradition of Aidoo and her leading protagonist Ato's Fante people, and given her age will soon pass on like Naana in *Fragments* to the ancestral world. Nana is aware, for example of the power within the medicinal and healing traditions of her people, which worked effectively for previous generations, but which healing powers have been usurped and undermined by the introduction of colonial rule and colonial culture. Thus in conversation with Ato's uncle Akroma, whose wife's "stomach" problem she enquires after, she asserts:

Have we not had enough of the white man's medicines? Since they do not seem to do anything for your wife, why do you not take her to Kofikrom? The herbalist there is famous (Aidoo: 19)

Medicines are meant to cure or provide healing. Thus one can read in Nana words – uttered with conviction – the need for a return to indigenous African sources of healing. As a grandmother, who has lived relatively long in the society and has had to opportunity to compare the different historical times that her community has experienced, she knows what works for her people and what does not. Her suggestion to Akroma to look towards the more effective pre-colonial healing methods is reminiscent of Amilcar Cabral's argument that although "[r]epressed" and "persecuted" in its multiple ways and forms "African culture survived all the storms, taking refuge in the villages – Kofikrom is village – in the forests and in the *spirit* of the generations who were victims of colonialism (Cabral :60; emphasis added).

Nana has the right attitude and spirit and is a grandmother, very much like Naana in Armah's *Fragments* with abundant cultural knowledge. Both elderly women

are full of the wisdom of the African ages. In Nana's case, her retrospective views on the usefulness of her people's own traditions provides an ideological standpoint from which to critique the colonial culture that has introduced a new practice, which is not working for some of them. Nana is in this respect not simply the voice of the old order, but one whose views also represent a projection into the future and the possible and potential ways in which the community might wish to rehabilitate itself. She castigates Ato severely for talking with "the foolishness of...[his] generation" (Aidoo 1965: 18), thereby indicating that Ato's generation, the post-independent neo-colonial generation that is – are irresponsible and lacking in wisdom. Nana as grandmother in Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, represents and functions as Mildred Hill-Lubin has argued in a similar context as "the preserver of the African extended family" and "the repository and distributor of family history, wisdom and Black lore," in addition to being a retainer and "communicator of values and ideals which support and enhance...her family and community" (Mill-Lubin 1992: 259)

Consequently, one can read Nana's comments about her people having had "enough of the white man's medicines" as an indicator of a quest for a return to roots. Ironically Ato is described as a "white man" suggesting or at the very least indicating that his thought patterns are very colonial and that he lacks the consciousness and self-awareness and pride in an African identity that his grandmother has. Ato's relatives refer to him on more than a few occasions as "Our white master" (Aidoo 1965: 15), a title he seems to have no problem with.

Nana's apprehensions also have to do with her own immediate future and that of her community:

My spirit Mother ought to have come for me eelier. Now what shall I tell them
who are gone?

...Someone should advise me on how to tell my story. My children, I am dreading
my arrival there//Where they will ask me news of home. Shall I tell them or shall
I not? Someone should lend me a tongue
Light enough with which to tell
My Royal Dead

That one of their stock
Has gone way and brought to their sacred precincts
The wayfarer (Aidoo 1965: 19)

Here again, Nana's statements and questions point to the role that the ancestors play within the lives of the African people. Death and Life in the African context are just stages of transition in which the living and the dead are constantly in communion and in touch with each other in a sequential and cyclical system of never-ending birth-death-and rebirth. This life-flow makes Nana's and Aidoo the author's "Royal Dead" - the departed ancestors of community to which Nana and Ato's entire family belong - important mediators within the society.

Ato is Nana's grandson; and so when he marries and brings home Eulalie Rush an African American woman without consulting his parents or any other members of his extended family, he flouts age-old customs in which family members from both his and Eulalie's side are meant to be part of the process of their coming together. Nana contemplates having passed on to the ancestral world and being asked to account for events and happenings within her family. Anticipating being asked news of "home," she needs to be in a position to inform them that their "sacred" traditions are intact and that there has been no break in the cycle of existence. We saw earlier Okonkwo's fear of the loss of Igbo ancestral power. Okonkwo was projecting into the future, examining a world in which he himself had passed on and had an ancestral role to play, but one which is truncated by the onslaught from Europe in the form of a Christian religion that has captured his children and his people as a whole and made them lose their indigenous sense of spirituality. Nana's fears, anxieties and apprehensions are very much the same as that of Okonkwo's.

Consequently Ato bringing home a "wayfarer" is not merely to do with the uneasiness his family feel about him marrying someone not from "home"; it also has to do with Ato potentially breaking the cycle of mutual co-dependence in which his family members should have been involved one way or the other with his marriage to Eulalie.

The point that this essay has made is that at all of the occasional occurrences and references to eldership and African ancestors in the texts and narratives under discussion are of concrete significance to African existence and can therefore be analysed and evaluated in relation to a number of issues relating to African cultural

identity. Looming large among these several issues are questions relating to African spirituality and the way forward for African peoples. At one point in Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, Akyere Ato's aunt, bewildered by his behaviour upon his return from the United States asks him: "What have you done to us my son? We do not know the ways of white people" (Aidoo 1965: 17). This articulates a consternation with Ato's newly-acquired Western ways and with the fact that he has become too much of an individual with no apparent care and concern for the cultural preferences of his family and his people. It is an issue which cannot simply be wished away with theories of modernization and development. Akyere's bewilderment, which also represents the deep sense of loss of a culturally alienated people is also articulated in the two epigraphs that form the introduction to this essay. In the first, Nana the grandmother in *The Dilemma of a Ghost* is expressing a sense of unease and anxiety at the irresponsible ways of the younger generation, who have abandoned time-honoured and proven traditions in their care-free and careless attitudes:

How will he find his around this dark place should the ghost of one of our forefathers pay us a visit? (Aidoo 1965: 13)

And in the second epigraph Naana, grandmother of Baako communicate a sense of loss, even of perplexity in being unable to recognize a place that has been home to her and generations of departed ancestors. If Naana's own "home" now appears to her as "a town of strangers" then questions need to be posed as to why this is so. All of this points to the fact of cultural displacement, a situation that is triggered by the introduction-often brutally and forcefully-of a whole new set of ideas, practices and values into a place that one always thought one was familiar with. "I myself am lost here a stranger unable to find a home in a town of strangers" (Armah 1970: 279). That is as alienating a statement as one can find to enunciate a sense of displacement.

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¹ As an advocate of this project of African self-rehabilitation, this author does not believe in or follow the dominant conventional academic and intellectual practice, where the reading and interpretation of African literary and other cultural texts are more often than not superimposed upon by counter-productive doses of historically and contextually inapplicable Western Euro-American critical theory. It is a problem that requires serious redress and hence the argument here does not deploy that detrimental-to-African-existential reality approach. The focus is more on generating critical meaning out of the cited texts with relevant references to historically and ideologically affiliated interpretative texts on African discourse. The ultimate suggestion is that knowledge must be seen to be generated in multiple ways.

² Both Achebe and Armah – ideologically conscious writers provide the linguistic and cultural context of their narratives by inserting in Igbo and Akan words and terminology respectively in *Things Fall Apart* and *Fragments*. Examining all of that language presents a whole argument in itself.