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Cyprian Ekwensi's *Burning Grass*: A Critical Assessment

Umar Abdurrahman

According to Douglas Killam, *Burning Grass* is not typical of Cyprian Ekwensi's novels, even though it is the most successful in terms of its achievement as art.¹ As a pastoral novel set in the savannah landscape of Northern Nigeria, its focus is far removed from the city; hence *Burning Grass* is structurally and thematically different from the author's other, urban works. In general terms, nevertheless, *Burning Grass* and the city novels have one common feature; they all analyze Nigerian society and its people. The novel is significant in that it probes with utmost honesty and sensitivity the life and culture of one Nigerian ethnic group, the nomadic Fulani.

The purpose of this analysis is to explore and articulate the stylistic, thematic and other qualities that make this novel unique. Some of these qualities include the skillful mixture of "fact and fantasy, reality and illusion."² The novel can aptly be described as a fantasy because it is full of fantastic elements. "The novel contains many of the qualities of the traditional African tales, magical occurrences, mysterious and seductive women, acts of phenomenal heroism, swift-paced adventure."³ These qualities make it distinctly rural, and it will be analyzed in relation to Ekwensi's view of "Fulani culture and their way of life,"⁴ and their position within the social and political reality of Nigeria.

This treatment of *Burning Grass* will consider its setting, plot and theme. The best way to approach the novel is to begin with its setting--the heart of the work's uniqueness. Ekwensi demonstrates that he can switch from urban to rural settings with ease and grace, and tell a beautiful and captivating tale. The novel is based on a real life experience as recorded in an article, "Three Weeks among the Fulani."⁵

Ekwensi's early career in forest management helped expose him to various rural cultures, which later became good sources for his fiction. As Nancy Schmidt remarks, "Ekwensi's earliest works were about Hausa and Fulani cultures and the forest work in Nigeria."⁶ *Burning Grass* is thus a real life drama given a fictional flavor. The names and characters remain unchanged in order to make the story as realistic as possible. The emphasis is on the countryside and nomadic life with all its accompanying problems. The theme is the struggle between nature and man.

In the novel, environment plays a crucial role in the development and determination of plot, characterization and theme. The environment becomes the single most important factor shaping the lives of the characters. The novel opens with a graphic description of the setting:

When they begin to burn grass in Northern Nigeria, it is time for the herdsmen to be moving the cattle southwards to the banks of the great river. And the hunters, lurking on the edge of the flames with dane gun, bow and arrow, sniff the fumes and train their eyes to catch the faintest flicker of beasts hastening from their hiding places.

It is time too, for the harmattan to blow dust into the eyes and teeth to wrinkle the skin, the harmattan that leaves in its wake from Libya to Lagos a shroud of fog that veils the walls and trees like muslin on a Sheik.⁷

This setting contrasts sharply with Ekwensi's familiar "claustrophobic"⁸ cities in his other novels. Here the space is wide and open. There is an abundance of nature. At first glance, man seems to be at ease, to consort and communicate with the bounties of his environment. Yet beneath this idyllic appearance, he struggles to shape and master the forces of nature that surround him. Man's vulnerability is underscored by a harsh and uncompromising environment. The setting dictates the terms of man's survival, demanding nothing less than total sacrifice. The burning of grass, the dryness of the land, the cold harmattan winds and the compulsory migration to the fertile grasslands all combine to set the mood for this tragic tale.

This harsh background suitably serves as an

introduction to the equally harsh mode of existence led by the nomadic Fulani of Northern Nigeria. The principal character, Mai Sunsaye, is introduced in the following passage:

The old man sat still tolling his chaplet. The trees were skeletons bleached in the sun - barren with peeling skins bruised by decades of thirst and hunger. He sat with his son in the dry atmosphere of Northern Nigeria and on the grass beside him lay his bow and quiverful of arrows steeped with poison. The somnolence in the air crackled. Gusts of heat rose from the earth and shimmered upwards to an intense blue sky that hurt the eyes. He could smell the smoke fumes and he knew they were burning the grass. He and his son lifted their eyes and took in the undulating hills, the rivulets and rocks. And it was lovely. But they were nomads, wandering cattlemen and loneliness was their drink. So they rested under the Sarowa tree not talking, the son leaning on a stick the way fowls stand on one leg on a thirsty day.⁹

In this powerful passage, Ekwensi places man against his natural environment in order to observe, as it were, the character's reactions both as an individual and as a member of his group. This anonymity suggests that Sunsaye's life and experiences represent a group: those whose loneliness is their drink. The atmosphere is oppressive, and the people disenchanting. The images of drought, decay and death are powerfully conveyed in the line, "The trees were skeletons bleached in the sun - barren with peeling skins bruised by decades of thirst and hunger."¹⁰ It is as if the land can no longer sustain life. The "burning of the grass" symbolizes the temporary death of the land, for the grass supports the life of the cattle on which the Fulani people survive. This is why "when they begin to burn grass in Northern Nigeria, it is time for the herdsmen to be moving the cattle southwards to the banks of the great river."¹¹ This is the season of migration to the south.

The harsh, dry setting has an overwhelming impact on the development of the novel, especially characterization. "These harsh conditions have a strong influence on the nomad's psyche and provide psychological clues to the torpid

pace of their existence."¹² Because of their extreme loneliness and isolation from civilization and modernization, the nomadic Fulani are still deeply rooted in African traditional beliefs. Time seems arrested for them. Though partially converted to Islam, they still retain certain pre-Islamic customs, freely mixing elements of animism and Islam.

The protagonist, Mai Sunsaye, embodies all the qualities found in a real nomadic Fulani. The following reveals much about the psyche of the nomadic Fulani:

Mai Sunsaye sat outside the hut, reading under the Sorowa tree. He was much versed in the Koran, and he read and wrote Arabic with a fluency not unusual among the high priests of the wandering Fulani. He made charms and amulets, he doctored the sick, he was a sage highly respected in the village of Dokan Toro. From far and near, his clients brought him their wounds of body and soul.¹³

This passage clearly demonstrates the nature of the psyche of the nomadic Fulani. Different influences, Islam and animism, priesthood and magic, struggle for dominance. As Ekwensi notes elsewhere, "One of the first things that struck me was the atmosphere of magic and superstition which dominated their every thought and action."¹⁴ Magic and superstition clearly dominate the lives of the characters in the novel. Even the plot of the novel is built around the superstitious belief in the affliction called *Sukugo*, as it is believed that magic is responsible for Mai Sunsaye's case of this wandering disease.

In discussing the plot, three factors must be taken into consideration: the love triangle of Fatimeh, Rikku and Hodio and the subsequent flight of Fatimeh and Hodio; Mai Sunsaye's wandering sickness, precipitated by Fatimeh's abduction; and the periodic movement of the tribe from dry land pastures to the wet land of the Niger River. In the case of Mai Sunsaye, the journey is undertaken at two levels, physical and psychological; the latter involves Sunsaye's mental state and the people's perceptions of his affliction.

The arrival of Fatimeh signals the deterioration of relationships within Mai Sunsaye's fairly stable family. Fatimeh's presence tragically leads to the family's

disintegration. It is as if everybody were stricken by the wandering disease, *Sukugo*. As the patriarch's prophetic words reveal, soon "there will be trouble"¹⁵ in the family, because of the sibling rivalry between Hodio and Rikku, especially over the possession of Fatimeh. "Brother against brother. O abomination. In our family! Broken is the family, gone is the pride of the Fulani."¹⁶ Although the relationship between the two brothers is strained by Hodio's jealousy of "the preferential way Rikku was treated,"¹⁷ it is the struggle for Fatimeh that precipitates the major conflict. Hodio at one point even threatens to do "something that would hurt father and son and to wound both of them."¹⁸ Hodio's elopement with Fatimeh, an object of Rikku's attention, is a cunning scheme to get even with "the father and son."¹⁹ Vengeance is thus one of the motifs explored in this study.

One can also argue that Hodio's decision to leave home is motivated by his opposition to tradition and custom, which indiscriminately regulate people's lives. The only way to avoid an open clash with the traditional system is to "run and live in a town where no one cared about them."²⁰ Fatimeh provides the chance for him to fulfill his desire, and his flight from home is a form of spiritual liberation. By his desertion, he severs his ties to his home and land. However, Hodio's act cannot be considered either heroic or revolutionary, because he runs from problems instead of facing and solving them. This idealistic tendency becomes manifest later in the course of his character development and brings hardship and sadness upon him.

It is also pertinent to state that Fatimeh, the object of Hodio's liberation from home, is herself liberated from bondage by the custodian of traditional authority, Mai Sunsaye. Her liberation ironically sets in motion events that, for better or worse, facilitate the breakup of the family that grants her freedom. It is Hodio's flight with Fatimeh that triggers the journey of Mai Sunsaye in search for them especially for Fatimeh, to keep his promise to his son, Rikku. The appearance of Fatimeh on the scene signals the onset of dissolution. Mai Sunsaye, the center of the family, can no longer hold it together as he becomes mentally afflicted. Each family member moves in a different direction in search of the missing ones which can be viewed on two levels: physical and psychological. On the physical level, Mai Sunsaye takes the

journey in order to find Fatimeh and bring her to Rikku: "By the help of Allah, if Fatimeh is still breathing in this world of ours, I will find her and bring her to you."²¹ This is a firm resolution to which Mai Sunsaye is consciously committed. His physical and emotional suffering are the result of this quest.

On the psychological level, Mai Sunsaye's wandering is linked to a super-natural phenomenon. All members of his family believe that there are unnatural causes for his wandering. It is believed that his wandering disease, *Sukugo*, is caused by an evil spell cast on him by his enemy and defeated rival, Ardo. Everybody else but the victim is aware of these causes, for "if only Mai Sunsaye had at the moment remembered the *Sukugo*, the charm of the Fulani cattlemen, a magic that turned studious men into wanderers, that led husbands to desert their wives, chiefs their people, and sane men their reason, Sunsaye would have refused to pursue the dove any further."²² Mai Sunsaye's lack of consciousness of his affliction is significant in the development of the plot. This ignorance helps to sustain the flow of events. When Mai Sunsaye becomes fully aware of his plight, the spell is automatically broken and he is cured. This occurs only toward the end of the story, when the plot and themes are fully developed. His ignorance is a technical device to maintain the suspense of the novel: every reader is interested in knowing the outcome of the protagonist's illness.

The wandering of Mai Sunsaye sparks yet another journey, that of the members of his family. This time the circle widens. The search is now not only for the two missing children, but also for the head of the family himself. In an effort to "track down Mai Sunsaye and break the spell, his entire family is ripped apart and scattered in all directions."²³ This journey is inevitable in order to restore the unity and honor of the scattered family, and its success depends to a large degree on curing Mai Sunsaye's disease. As long as he continues to wander, the family will remain scattered. He is the force that draws them to him and binds them together.

The last journey is both physical and symbolic. The movement with the cattle to the great river bank is also inevitable, because it is a flight from disaster to survival, and from the old traditional life to the new world. This is the journey of hope, of the future which can be accomplished only when all the crises besetting the original home are

resolved. The entire plot is developed around these journeys by Mai Sunsaye and his family. Their positive and negative experiences in their new environment constitute the plot, characterization and theme of the novel.

To analyze these experiences, we must carefully explore the following elements: mystery, magic, heroism, adventure, good and evil. These elements can provide much insight into the characters and themes in the novel.

Mystery is present throughout, in many forms: the wandering sickness, *Sukugo*; the dove that Mai Sunsaye follows aimlessly; Baba, the old man of the forest; the mysterious cattlemoan; and the mystery of Fatimeh and her jungle abode. These mysterious elements sustain the suspense of the story.

The affliction of Mai Sunsaye by the dreaded disease, *Sukugo*, appears mysterious. Mai Sunsaye follows the dove wherever it goes. He has "no desire to go back, only forward."²⁴ Where does the bird come from? Who sends it? There is wide speculation that it has been sent by Mai Sunsaye's sworn enemy, Ardo, but nobody is really certain. The hero's journey also contains elements of the fantastic, because throughout his wanderings, he is conscious of neither his direction nor the physical world around him. Everything appears like a dream. In the course of his wandering, he encounters many strange things. First, he meets a strange old man called Baba, who lives alone in a village deserted because of the tsetse fly invasion. Why does Baba live alone? Nobody really knows the reason, except that, as he explains, the city is "too clean"²⁵ for him.

There is also the story of the mysterious woman "who wandered about the savannah always dressed in white."²⁶ One might ask, who is this woman? Is this woman in white the same as Fatimeh, the object of Sunsaye's search? Ekwensi is here introducing oral traditional elements to make his fictional account more interesting. When Mai Sunsaye meets a woman living alone in the forest with her twins and cattle, it takes him quite a while to realize that the woman is Fatimeh. His mind suddenly flashes back to the woman in white of the legend. This is because mentally, he is still suspended between fantasy and reality. In this instance, even readers are not sure whether they are dealing with fantasy or reality. Ekwensi's point here is that sometimes our imaginative

faculties can be so faulty that we may fail to distinguish between reality and illusion. Perhaps this a weakness of human nature.

The world of the fantastic is also revealed in the people's attitude toward magic and the supernatural. It is "by magic and superstition they live and die."²⁷ This dominant attitude is illustrated in the following character assessment:

Shaitu's life, like that of any other cattle Fulani, was ruled by beliefs for which she could find no logical explanation. She accepted happenings but associated them with inanimate objects and peculiar circumstances. A talisman could bring luck... A man may strike down his enemy by calling his name aloud and firing a needle into the sky. A man could send his enemy wandering to his death by striking him with the sukugo, the wandering charm. This was what she concluded. Her belief in omens and potents was steadfast, and Leibe's description tallied with the manner of the black magicians among the cattle Fulani.²⁸

The use of magical and supernatural powers such as talismans, *Sukugo*, *Baduhu* (the giver of darkness), and firing a needle into the sky to strike down an enemy serves to balance the fears of the people and their moral and ethical beliefs within the traditional society. This system of beliefs helps regulate their lives and maintain sanity and coherence in the traditional community. Mai Sunsaye is both feared and respected because of his magical powers. Having a magical power in a traditional society implies having "esoteric" knowledge. For, as Micea Eliade notes:

Knowing the origin of an object, an animal, a plant and so on is equivalent to acquiring a magical power over them by which they can be controlled, multiplied and reproduced at will.²⁹

In spite of his esoteric knowledge, why does Mai Sunsaye, "the famous medicine man,"³⁰ the maker of "charms and amulets,"³¹ and "the doctor of body and soul,"³² fail to cure himself of his wandering disease? Perhaps there is no armor against fate. Possibly his powers fail because the author wants to stress the

importance of traditional beliefs. Mai Sunsaye does not seem to have any control over his fate. His aimless wandering finally catches up with his aging and abused body, and he dies. His suffering and death show that fate triumphs over those who believe in it exclusively. Ekwensi seems to say that the nomadic Fulani are fatalistic by nature, and that their extreme fatalism often brings them disaster and death.

Traditional medicine and magic can be used for protective as well as destructive purposes. What is important is that those who believe in these forces or possess their power must use them at the right time. Hodio uses his magical powers successfully to defend himself against his enemy Shehu, during their confrontation:

But Hodio kept up his magic chant, gazing up with fire into the eyes of Shehu. And Shehu was weakening. Hodio forced him down the hill until he turned and fled towards a waiting horse.³³

In order for magic to be effective, one must not only believe in its powers but must also have confidence in himself. In other words, belief must be accompanied by action. Jalla is defeated in a *sharro* contest by an opponent who uses *Baduhu* against him, because Jalla refuses to use this magic himself. Jalla could easily have applied his supernatural powers to protect his body and honor. It therefore becomes necessary for his father to impart to him the wisdom of the tribe that "one does not go to *sharro* without adequate preparation."³⁴ Knowledge is useful only when it is applied. Another form of magic used is the firing of the needle into the sky to strike down an enemy. This is bad magic, since it is aimed at inflicting harm upon the victim: "A man may strike his enemy down by calling his name and firing a needle into the sky."³⁵

The use of these magical powers, whether for protective or destructive reasons, is typical of the belief system of the cattle Fulani. They seem "helpless in the face of nature and talisman."³⁶ Every phenomenon, whether natural or supernatural, has a hidden motive behind it and can be explained according to one's fears or hopes. Ekwensi is surely being sincere in his portrayal of the Fulani people and their traditions. Viewing this vanishing African traditional

culture, it is uplifting to see that people who adhere to traditions that make them so proud, so distinct still exist.

What are the qualities that make the cattle-raising Fulani so proud, so distinct and so ageless? Shyness and pride are the major character traits of the Fulani people, especially the nomadic ones. The shyness stems from their minimal contact with townfolk or city life: "Visits to the market are the Fulani's main contact with the rest of the world."³⁷ In most parts of the savannah grassland where the nomadic Fulani dwell, city markets are held only once a week. The people are, as a result, less sophisticated in their perceptions and interpretations of modern values. This is why town settlers, particularly the Hausa and Kanuri people, often make jokes about the crudeness and stupidity of the cattle-raising Fulani. The cattle-raising Fulani man on the other hand considers town life too frenetic and stressful. He prefers the tranquil life of the country. For him, "town life is not the life,"³⁸ because he is used to "the discomfort and leads a simple life in which the floor is his bed and nature is always a companion."³⁹ These rough conditions make him tough, both physically and mentally.

The concept of pride as it applies to the nomadic Fulani has a positive connotation. This pride is derived from the fundamental philosophy of life called *Pulaaku* - the quality of being a true Fulani. *Pulaaku* can be defined as the sum total of the social, religious and political values of the Fulani people. Derrick J. Stenning, in "The Pastoral Fulani of Northern Nigeria," says:

There are three components of *Pulaaku*. These are *seemteende* (modesty and reserve), *munyal* (patience and fortitude), and *hakkiilo* (care and foresight). Like the English words that seem to translate it best, *munyal* is a somewhat negative quality. A man must have *munyal*, for example, in bereavement, in polygamous marriage, at the height of the dry season and in epidemics of bovine disease. *Hakkiilo* is mainly a technical virtue. For example, a man with *hakkiilo* never fails to inspect his cattle in the morning and never fails the water spirit who first gave the cattle to the Fulani, lighting the corral fire before the herd comes back at dusk and putting it out as they leave the corral for the morning

grazing... *Seemteende* is the virtue of correct conduct in personal relations in a given situation within the group to which a man belongs.⁴⁰

Some of the above qualities can be found in the characters of the novel. The principal figure, Mai Sunsaye, despite his affliction and scattered home, bears his misfortune with patience and fortitude. Rikku displays shyness in his relationship with the Kanuri prostitute, Kantuma. Also, Rikku's decision to work for the wealthy cattle woman, Ligu, demonstrates his foresight. These character traits are the major distinguishing marks of the nomadic Fulani.

Perhaps one of the most conspicuous marks of the nomadic Fulani is their urge to prove their toughness and manhood. They do this by periodically undergoing a ritual beating contest, *Sharro*:

The ceremony of "sharro" is the trial whereby a Fulani boy in his late teens proves that he is now worthy to be looked on by the menfolk of his clan as one of themselves. It marks the beginning of manhood, the putting away of the name boy.⁴¹

This is a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. It has both physical and spiritual dimensions. It is a time when worldly wisdom and social and religious obligations are entrusted to the initiates. *Sharro* tests both the physical and mental endurance of the initiate. There is no room for laxity or an open display of emotions. Any youth who runs away from the contest, because of either fear or pain, brings disgrace upon himself and his family. In reality, "A Fulani youth who had not taken a flogging at the Sharro would never find a maiden to marry him."⁴² When Jalla runs away from the ring, he is bitterly rebuked by his father. He is called, among other things, a "coward", whose action brings shame to the whole family. By allowing himself to be defeated, Jalla willfully violates sacred social values such as patience, bravery and pride, the true foundations of the cattle Fulani's culture.

By reflecting upon these traditional beliefs and heroic qualities of the cattle Fulani, Ekwensi makes the reader more familiar with the Fulani people and culture. Through

fictional characters, Ekwensi is able to project realistic social situations. Through a single family, a whole ethnic group is studied and through this group the entire society is reflected. This is the essence of the literature of realism. In order to comprehend social realities fully, we should study the individual as a dynamic member of his social group, "to find an integral and coherent response to the problems common to all members of the group in relation to their social and natural environment."⁴³ In studying the characters in the novel, we become aware of these problems and their relationship to the society.

The characters in the novel can be divided into two groups: the rural dwellers and the town or city dwellers. Each group has its distinguishing features. The rural folk are characterized by extreme traditionalism and fatalism. The town people, on the other hand, are dominated by materialism and modernism. Each camp struggles to promote its system of beliefs. As a result, there is an inevitable clash between the two systems, the rural and traditional versus the urban and modern. Mai Sunsaye and his wife are the representatives of the old order, while Mr. McMinter, the forest reservation officer, his assistant, Mr. Chikeh, and Kantuma, the Kanuri seductress, represent the new order. McMinter and Chikeh are also representatives of the new administration, which emphasizes modernization.

On the traditional side, Mai Sunsaye, the old village head of Dokan Toro, embodies the traditional values of the cattle Fulani. He practices the art of traditional healing of both "the body and soul,"⁴⁴ with great expertise and efficiency. As a local leader, he is powerful and respectable. As a father he is devoted. He will do anything to protect and please the members of his family. He tells Rikku, "By Allah if Fatimeh is still breathing in this world of ours, I will find her and bring her to you."⁴⁵ He is at this initial stage designed to be a perfect character. Ironically, it is his love and desire to please and serve his family that bring him great suffering and death. In his desperate attempt to find Fatimeh and Hodio for the sake of his son, Rikku, he dies of exhaustion.

Like a true nomadic Fulani, Mai Sunsaye firmly believes in the sanctity, unity and honor of the family. He is confident of the efficacy of his magic and believes that it should always be used to protect one's honor. He never

hesitates to correct his children whenever they go astray, even if it means speaking harshly to them. Although he loves and respects his eldest son, Jalla, he blames Jalla for fleeing from the Sharro contest. The father still reprimands the son sharply, "You are young and there is that blood of the rebel in you. But you can't run away forever."⁴⁶ As the custodian of the old values, Mai Sunsaye regards Jalla's actions as potentially disruptive to the traditional system. In traditional society, children, no matter how successful in life they become, must always listen to and obey their parents. Moreover, correcting a child's mistake is in itself an expression of love.

The name Mai Sunsaye (literally owner of birds) is significant. Mai Sunsaye's familiarity with the birds arises from his constant companionship with them as a cattle rearer. Ironically, the very creatures he "owns" (as his name suggests) and knows very well, now become his master; the bird emerges as the sole controller of his mind and action. In short, his personality is now completely transformed, and he has no other desire but to "grow wings and overtake the dove."⁴⁷ Perhaps the bird also symbolizes freedom. Whatever the case, the personality of Mai Sunsaye reveals much about the character of the cattle Fulani.

Mai Sunsaye's three sons are torn between two opposing values: traditionalism and modernism. The three sons, Jalla, Hodio and Rikku, are less inclined to follow tradition than their parents. Jalla, the oldest, is the only one who clearly shows sympathy towards the traditional past by maintaining some customs. The two younger sons are much more rebellious in their attitude toward traditional life. They tend to be adventurous and are willing to experience and experiment with new ideas.

Jalla follows his father's footsteps by raising cattle and by observing the ritual of his people, *Sharro*. He becomes wealthy by traditional means, controlling a thousand head of cattle in his camp. Jalla's fame is achieved by hard work and devotion to traditional values, and he thus becomes his father's focus of attention because he represents all the aspirations of his people. His father is thrilled by his son's success to the point of open flattery: "Jalla, you are the most important of my sons."⁴⁸ This recognition is important because it makes Jalla, in the eyes of his father, the legitimate

heir of the Sunsaye family.

The younger sons, Hodio and Rikku, are somewhat indifferent in their attitude toward tradition. Nonetheless, Rikku is the most beloved son; at least this is what Hodio wants us to believe. Hodio, more than the other two brothers, possesses what his father believes to be the true physical features of the Fulani. Yet Hodio becomes the first to shun the traditions of his people. Hodio's rebellion against traditional authority is revealed early in the story when he devises a plan to escape parental domination. That is, he and Fatimeh "would run away and live in a town where no one cared about tradition and custom."⁴⁹ By leaving his parental home, the cornerstone of tradition, he is in effect bidding farewell to the stricter constraints of traditional Fulani culture.

Hodio, "the man of tireless energy," establishes a new home in the new village of Chanka. There he marries a new wife, Amina, and with vigor and determination becomes involved in the sugar industry. As he tells his father:

He who waits will see what is in the grass, Hodio said. I plan to remain here at New Chanka and to follow this sugar making. If I stay here for two years, I shall be something.⁵⁰

The sugar making business symbolizes modern technology. Hodio's involvement in the enterprise can therefore be considered a movement from traditionalism to modernism. His father cannot help but be impressed by Hodio's dramatic transformation, "It was difficult to imagine that this slim, athletic boy in so modern a town was his boy."⁵¹ Hodio's change, however, is not total, for he still retains some useful aspects of his culture which are vital for his ego enhancement and survival. He still proudly remembers his glorious past and uses magic against his enemies, like Shehu. To his father's surprise and pleasure, Hodio keeps "a large collection of his Arabic writing, bound in leather,"⁵² in his own room, evidence that he is "turning his thoughts to religion and righteous living." Whether Hodio is sincere or deceitful one cannot be sure. What is certain, however, is that he is now a new man who lives in a "whitewashed mud hut,"⁵³ and is determined to make money and "live like a town dweller."⁵⁴ By exchanging his money for the sugarcane mill,

he has symbolically replaced his old traditional life with the new life. In his own mind, the new life is the one worth living.

The youngest son, Rikku, similarly does not make a clean break with tradition. In fact, Rikku "is torn between tradition and modernism."⁵⁵ He is divided between the love of traditional women like Fatimeh and Ligu and the modern city woman, Kantuma. Kantuma is much older and more experienced in city ways,⁵⁶ and Rikku fears the consequences of their love affair:

He was afraid of himself. This was an artful woman, a sorceress, with a strange beauty. Sometimes he thought of her as a snake, coldly beautiful, but deadly when she struck.⁵⁷

Rikku is correct, for Kantuma is deadly in her game. Her love of Rikku is not genuine, because it is based on sexual exploitation. She is using Rikku, a symbol of innocence, to bolster her public image. Love between Rikku and Ligu is perhaps more real, being founded upon mutual respect and partnership. It is not surprising, then, that Ligu becomes worried when Rikku is abducted by Shehu and his men. Rikku's decision at the end to remain with Ligu (a traditional woman) and look after her cattle until he becomes self-supporting reflects his inclination toward traditional life. The choice of the three brothers to live in the city, to follow city ways, but yet to retain some useful elements of their tradition, points to flexibility of the two systems. Ekwensi seems to be saying that civilization and modernism do not necessarily entail total rejection of one's past cultural values. The golden rule is that one should always borrow the best from every culture and retain those elements of his native culture that are beneficial.

The minor male characters, Shehu, Ardo, the Babejo and Chikeh, play different but significant roles in the development of the major characters and the evils of the novel. Shehu and Ardo represent forces of reaction, evil and vengeance. They are responsible for the suffering and disintegration of the Mai Sunsaye family. Ardo is accused of casting an evil spell, *Sukugo*, upon his chieftaincy rival, Mai Sunsaye, which sends the latter wandering in the forest.

Shehu persists in tormenting Sunsaye's sons over the abduction of his former slave girl, Fatimeh. Both use evil means to settle old scores. Mr. McMinter and his assistant, Mr. Chikeh, represent the new order and authority. Their action of inoculating the cattle against the rinderpest disease signifies the ushering in of a new era: "The white men and the medical people were moving the villagers from the Old Chanka to the new Chanka."⁵⁸ Other minor characters, like the Prince, have less significant roles. The Prince is introduced simply to illuminate the character of Kantuma and the corruptions of the city.

The female characters, unlike the male ones, are ultra-conservatives, with the possible exception of Kantuma. This is understandable, because in most African societies women play the traditional role of housekeeping. Their contact with the outside world is often more limited than men's. For this reason, men tend to be more adventurous and more willing to accept new changes. The most traditional of the women in the story is Shaitu, Mai Sunsaye's wife. "Shaitu's life, like that of any other Fulani, was ruled by beliefs for which she could find no logical explanation."⁵⁹ Shaitu strongly believes that her husband's wandering disease is caused by Ardo's evil charms. The dramatic manner in which she reaches her conclusion indicates the extent to which her whole life is dominated by the belief and fear of the supernatural. What is rational to her is absolute belief in the traditional system.

Ligu is also traditional in that "she is a champion cattle grazer."⁶⁰ She is exceedingly enterprising, and tough enough to protect her interests. When her cowhand, Rikku, is kidnapped by Kantuma, the most powerful woman in town, she boldly challenges the latter. Ligu is extraordinarily powerful, in that in this male dominated society, she is determined enough to be wealthy and have men under her control. She is a liberated woman in this sense, although her decision to raise cattle makes her traditional.

However, while Ligu derives her power from sheer courage and ambition, her rival Kantuma survives through deception and falsehood. Kantuma achieves her fame through notoriety and prostitution. She sells liquor and sleeps with men for material gains. Kantuma and her type represent city women. She embodies the mystery and seduction that often captivate people's dreams and imagination.

Rikku saw now that she was dressed in oriental fashion with glittering bracelets on her slender wrists and something like a crown on her head. She stood up now among her draperies and the smoke of incense was swirling around her.⁶¹

She is draped in fantasy. Her ostentatious image attracts attention to her external qualities more than to her true self. This makes her artificial, and men who come to her want to have her body, not her soul. Perhaps Kantuma in her totality symbolized the city, with its artificiality, materialism and individualism.

In contrast, Fatimeh is an embodiment of virtuous qualities. She is capable of unselfish love. She is dutiful as a maid and humble enough to realize and admit her limitations as a slave. "As a slave girl she could never hope to marry a free-blood and proud Fulani like Hodio Sunsaye."⁶² Her flight with Hodio from home is her way of resolving the impasse in the love triangle that is threatening to destabilize the family. In this respect, her leave taking can be regarded as a sacrifice. She has an indomitable spirit: betrayed and deserted by Hodio, she survives with her strong will, on her own in the jungle and against all odds. She lives in solitude in the world she carved for herself, nursing a hope that one day she may regain what she has lost. Her healing of Mai Sunsaye reflects her nobility and humanity. It may also be an expression of gratitude for the freedom granted her. Compared to the other women, Fatimeh exhibits unquestionable moral qualities.

The female characters on the whole are more powerfully drawn than the men. Apart from the minor characters, such as Amina and Fiddigo, the four women we have discussed have towering personalities. Despite their professional differences, they share a common drive for power and a control of men. They are often smart enough to control and manipulate things in their favor. Kantuma exercises a great influence over the city through her relationship with its prince. Ligu is diligently served by Rikku who thereby seeks to become prosperous himself. Mai Sunsaye, the priestly king of Dokan Toro, is helpless in spite of his knowledge of native medicine, until he is cured by Fatimeh, an ordinary slave girl. Shaitu is also effective in

crisis management. She is able to sustain herself and the remnants of her family until the entire family is reunited.

The male characters appear less powerful. Mai Sunsaye is unable to handle himself properly throughout the period of his illness. His two younger sons, Hodio and Rikku, are deeply immersed in sibling rivalry and are eventually separated. Jalla lacks confidence in his ability to defend himself, a lack leading to an act of cowardice. Shehu and Ardo are blinded by ambition, hatred and the desire for vengeance and are unable to realize their potentialities as forceful characters. The prince of the city shamelessly pines for Kantuma's love and attention, and his character suffers as a result. The forest officers, McMinter and Chikeh, are preoccupied with enforcing the law and fail to be affected by local events. In the end, no single character emerges as a true hero. This is probably Ekwensi's intention: to emphasize social situations over characters and society over individuals. If this is his real intention, then it is achieved.

This brings us to the final part of our evaluation, the treatment of the theme. The major theme is the movement from traditionalism to modernism. The minor themes include love, vengeance, heroism, magic, adventure, violence and the struggle between man and nature. Major and minor themes are at times interwoven. Certain aspects of heroic adventure can be associated with traditional beliefs. In the novel, Ekwensi explores social and religious customs that are dominant in nomadic Fulani culture. Through Mai Sunsaye and his clan, we observe the influence of certain traditional beliefs, such as magic, superstition and rituals like *Sharro*. Magic and sorcery play a major role in regulating the behavior of the people. A single superstitious belief can break up the entire clan and community. Vengeance is swift and often merciless.

In such a society, success is determined by one's faith in the potency of his magical powers. The defeat of Jalla in the beating contest is seen as lack of adequate magical protection. Success is also measured by the size of one's herd. Jalla is considered a great man in the traditional sense because he has a large number of cattle. The urge to acquire a large herd is consistent with the cultural philosophy of the people and the desire for social superiority. This feeling of superiority is also associated with veneration of the past and

one's ancestry. Hodio, named after Uthman Dan Fodio, the founder of the Fulani empire of Northern Nigeria, is always eager to trace his noble lineage to this historical figure:

We are Fulani, sons of Dan Fodio, master magicians,
we fight like cats, who die a hundred deaths and
live, we also test our manhood by Sharro.⁶³

It is obvious, then, that Hodio and his family thrive on the glory of the past and their noble ancestry. They use it to wage psychological warfare against their opponents.

Hodio's family is connected with slavery, which unfortunately taints its name. Slavery is used here to show tribal and class distinctions. The low status of Fatimeh as a slave girl, for instance, makes it impossible for her "to marry a free-blooded and proud Fulani like Hodio Sunsaye."⁶⁴ Later on, Fatimeh makes a similar statement about her inferior social status:

You taught me to be a herdsman. As a slave, I had no right to love a free born like Rikku. But now I have been cleansed, for I have brought forth. You have brought forth and by custom you are no longer a slave.⁶⁵

Custom dictates that a slave woman becomes free when she bears a child of her master. Thus, by custom Fatimeh becomes a free woman. Fatimeh's emancipation is necessary in order for the movement from traditionalism to modernism to be complete: the city environment does not allow the existence and practice of slavery. In the city, everybody is his own master.

These traditional forces are set against modernism. At the end, modernism triumphs in the movement from the village to the city. All the traditionalists have left the village of Dokan Toro for the new city of Chanka. They have, through this process of migration, undergone social and psychological transformations. Mai Sunsaye's three sons plan to settle permanently in the new city and try their fortune in the sugar industry, which symbolizes modernism. This new attitude prompts Mai Sunsaye, the arch-traditionalist, to make the following observation:

Thus it is that our people are drifting more and more away from the hard life to the soft life of the city. Even you, my son.⁶⁶

Earlier on, Ligu, another staunch supporter of the traditional system, made a statement outlining the advantages of country life:

Understand this. We Fulanis do not like you town dwellers. We love our simple life which makes man free and brave and gives woman a strong position. Can you understand that?⁶⁷

It is clear that each system has its own merits and demerits. Rural life is natural and abundant while urban life is restrictive and artificial. Urban culture is also intensively materialistic and individualistic, leaving no room for extended family systems. Urban dwellers often embody corrupt, individualistic and materialistic tendencies which country folk find hard to understand and accept. This is why it is easier for the youths, Jalla, Hodio and Rikku, to adapt to city life than it is for the older people, who are more entrenched in the traditional system.

However, despite all its negative values, the city holds the promise and future of mankind. No matter how glorious the past, one must move with one's time. Ekwensi believes that the old order is sick and dying, as carried in the imagery of "sleeping sickness".⁶⁸ The cure lies in the movement to the new land, represented by the new Chanka, and in embracing modern ideas and technology:

The white men and the medical people were moving the villages from the Old Chanka to the New Chanka. All because of the fly that gives men the sleeping sickness. So I came here with them. I heard about the sugarcane mill and they helped me to buy this one. I pay back money every month from what I earn. Some day it will be my own with nothing more to pay. Then I can live like a town dweller.⁶⁹

Hodio, the first person to rebel against traditionalism, also

becomes the first to accept modernism. This suggests that no matter how attached the nomadic Fulani are to their cattle and grazing land, they cannot afford to be left out in their nation's race to modernization. They must move and seek their fortune in the cities. The burning of the grass symbolizes "the passage of time, the movement of moving on, the time of departure for new land and new goals."⁷⁰ This then, is the main message of the novel.

On the whole, *Burning Grass* is a compelling novel of adventure and intrigue. It is written in a simple and economical style - with an economy that may have been a minor disadvantage for the author. The novel was cut by one-half, "from eighty thousand to forty thousand"⁷¹ words which makes it too crammed to allow the full development of episodes and minor themes. It is impossible for a people's culture to be comprehensively presented in so few pages. Yet Ekwensi's knowledge of Fulani customs must be respected: he is able, in these few pages, to project them sincerely and accurately.

The novel's overall merit lies in its adept mixture of fantasy and reality, of history and sociology, which makes it enjoyable for all types of readers. The use of such narrative techniques as proverbs, tales, riddles and songs greatly enhances the work's structural quality and entertainment value. The theme of backwardness versus progress is well developed. It will be interesting, however, to see how long Ekwensi's "proud, distinct and ageless"⁷² people will be able, in adapting to the new environment, to sustain their favorite belief that "A town must have the smell of cattle to please the Fulani."⁷³ If they cannot, then their transformation into city dwellers will be complete. In this case, progress may triumph over tradition, as Ekwensi suggests in his novel.

¹ Douglas Killam, ed. "Cyprian Ekwensi," *Introduction to Nigerian Literature*, Bruce King (Lagos: Lagos University Press, 1971, 95).

² Killam, p. 94.

³ Margaret Laurence, *Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists 1952-1966, 1971*. (London: Macmillan, 1968), 158.

⁴ Ernest Emenyonu, *Cyprian Ekwensi: The Man and His Works* (London: Evans Brothers, Ltd., 1974) 95.

⁵ Cyprian Ekwensi, "Three Weeks Among the Fulani," *Nigeria Magazine*, Oct. 1960: 124-133.

- 6 Nancy Schmidt, "An Anthropological Analysis of Nigerian Fiction," diss., Northwestern University, 1965, 187-188.
- 7 Cyprian Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* (London: Heinemann, 1962), 1.
- 8 Lindfors, 59.
- 9 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 1-2.
- 10 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 1.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 George Nyamdi, *The West African Novel with Particular Reference to Elechi Amadi's The Concubine* (Berne: Peter Long, 1982) p. 48.
- 13 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 12.
- 14 Ekwensi, "Three Weeks Among the Fulani", 125.
- 15 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 11.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 5.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 8.
- 21 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 11.
- 22 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 13.
- 23 Emenyonu, 96-97.
- 24 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 29.
- 25 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 48.
- 26 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 121.
- 27 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 63.
- 28 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 16
- 29 Micea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1963) 14.
- 30 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 61.
- 31 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 12.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 62-63.
- 34 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 90.
- 35 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 16.
- 36 Emenyonu 97.
- 37 A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, *The Cattle People of Nigeria* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959) 22.
- 38 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 110.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Derrick J. Stenning, "The Pastoral Fulani of Northern Nigeria," in *People of Africa*, James Lowell Gibbs, ed. (New York: Holt Rinehart and Wilson, Inc., 1965)

- 41 Kirk-Greene, 26.
- 42 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 83.
- 43 Lucien Goldman, *Method in the Sociology of Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwood Publisher, 1981) 60.
- 44 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 12.
- 45 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 11.
- 46 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 31.
- 47 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 13.
- 48 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 31.
- 49 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 8.
- 50 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 63.
- 51 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 57.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 56.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Eustace Palmer, *The Growth of the African Novel* (London Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd., 1979) 55.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 113.
- 58 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 56.
- 59 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 16.
- 60 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 101.
- 61 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 110.
- 62 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 8.
- 63 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 62.
- 64 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 8.
- 65 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 129.
- 66 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 146.
- 67 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 133.
- 68 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 56.
- 69 Ibid.
- 70 Martin Tucker, *Africa in Modern Literature: A Survey of Contemporary Writing in English* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1967) 74.
- 71 Emenyonu, *Cyprian Ekwensi* 96.
- 72 Ekwensi, Interview, *Nigeria Magazine*, October 1960:133.
- 73 Ekwensi, *Burning Grass* 57.