

**UCLA**

**Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies**

**Title**

Saviours and Survivors: The Disappearing Community in the Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2g23n8gd>

**Journal**

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 14(2)

**ISSN**

0041-5715

**Author**

Wright, Derek

**Publication Date**

1985

**DOI**

10.5070/F7142017047

**Copyright Information**

Copyright 1985 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

SAVIOURS AND SURVIVORS:  
THE DISAPPEARING COMMUNITY IN THE NOVELS OF AYI KWEI ARMAH

by

Derek Wright

In the pivotal middle section of Armah's first novel, *Teacher* looks back, and the man forward, to the awakening of "the people" to "make themselves whole again."<sup>1</sup> Expanding his communalising "we" from the wee-smoking fringe-group to embrace the whole electoral community, Teacher is later remembered as identifying his "single mind" with "the hopes of a whole people." (p. 162) The urban clerks who are "the people" of the novel's present, however, clearly constitute no such unity but suggest rather an anti-community or parody-society of solitaries, "opening up their sores" only in anonymous long-distance telegraph messages traveling across the void of the modern state. (p. 21)

In the second novel, *Fragments*, Baako's rejected screenplays invest "THE OPPRESSED" with the still more shadowy and remote coherence of abstract shapes and colours.<sup>2</sup> Baako struggles to explain to the sneering Asante-Smith "his desire to find out more about the illiterate people's images and myths for use in his work" (p. 218) whilst himself, from the distance of the expatriated been-to, conceiving those very people chiefly at the level of image and myth. Of "the community" he theorises:

We have the old heroes who turned defeat into victory for the whole community. But these days the community has disappeared from the story. Instead, there is the family, and the hero comes and turns its poverty into sudden wealth. And the external enemy isn't the one at whose expense the hero gets his victory; he's supposed to get rich, mainly at the expense of the community. (pp. 146-7)

Although "the community" retains its currency as an idea for Baako, it has, in practical terms, "disappeared" from Armah's story. Juana's nightmare headlong flight through modern Accra in the second chapter reveals communal feeling to have degenerated into isolated outbursts of violent destruction and the psychiatrist-healer cannot justify "sending the once destroyed back to knock again against the very things that had destroyed their peace." (p. 34) In this anti-community of distressed loneliness and violent tensions demanding release, impatient drivers are "trapped in their cars" behind death-dealing tankers (p. 30); expatriates "kept themselves imprisoned in their little blind incestuous groups," walling

themselves off from "the life that had trapped their hosts into laughing matter" (p. 36); the dog-slayer's poisonously-repressed desires are given graphic form in the mixture of blood-clotted pus and urine running down his leg ("Something that had stayed locked up and poisoned the masculinity of his days was now coming down..."). (p. 29) Fleeing entrapment by the externals of rank and status, Juana tries to let a "sense of inner worth come between herself and those she walked among, so that there could be the human touching the hunger for which continued in her in spite of everything" (p. 19), a desire repeated in her impulse to touch the "smooth beauty" of a solitary flower growing on the slope to the beach. (p. 40) But her quest leads her to the false fraternity of a fraudulent beach-messiah, who retires to a chauffeur-driven Mercedes parked at a discreet distance, and to a meeting with Baako's cargo-minded mother. The rural community has also "disappeared from the story." Baako, who has visited his ancestral village only once, vaguely registers the tourist's impression of beauty and horror during the country trip and reels off the names of places with the traveler's tabulatory impersonality:

The brown roadbeds up north with their dangerous gravelly sides and laterite dust had remained beautiful in his mind, and the villages on the way down from Tumu and Wa were now sounds, though there was no forgetting them as places where maimed people and sickness walked down every half-hidden path...Sibele Lilixia Jesifo Han Sabuli Fran Naro Jang Kaleo Pirisi and Wa. (pp. 190-1)

This fleeting, distant community is also seen to have fallen apart. Juana "had been into the countryside and there seen a kind of destruction that made people look to the grinding town as if some salvation could be found there. In the countryside things were worse." (p. 22)

In Armah's third novel, Why Are We So Blest?, the African community, now more remote than ever at the distance of Modin's trans-Atlantic expatriation, is mythicised into the beneficiary of deliverance by a Promethean "reverse-crossover", an idea scoffed at by Mike the Fascist: "I know nobody goes through the struggle to get here so they can fall back into that communal dirt."<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, in the foreground of the novel's action, the community's would-be revolutionary saviours are revealed as paralysed and emasculated by the luxuries of westernised exile. The later pursuit of vanished communities through the mediums of epic and history provides no comfortable retreat from disintegration. The Akan and Ashanti societies of Two Thousand Seasons and The Healers are undermined from within at early stages of development and



given over to Arab and British Imperialism by the slave-king Koranche and the court-intriguer and manipulator Ababio. Armah's novels are informed by a radical uncertainty about all communal solidarities, past and present. This article will focus on the ways in which "the community", in its modern and traditional forms, is conceived and presented and will try to determine which, if any, of the novels' material and mythical impressions of community have any ultimate value.

In The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born the man moves through a dystopia of fragmented individuals and lost connections. He identifies with "lone and empty" departing trains (p. 15) and his fellow-commuters travel in pockets of isolation: "Everyone alone with his troubles. Better." (p. 103) *The Atlantic Caprice*, which should serve as a rallying point for communal indignation against the new power-structures, divides and isolates, making the "angry ones" feel "the loneliness of mourners at a festival of crazy joy." (p. 10) The fourth chapter of the novel opens on a lamp-lit tableau of solitaires: prostitute, market-mammy, madonna and child each wait in silent isolation from one another (p. 35), and in vague but exclusive relationship to the "heroes" who will buy their wares or relieve their pain. The scene is paradigmatic of the African communications-networks at the departure of the colonists - each pointing towards a European metropolitan centre - which Armah himself has written about<sup>4</sup> and which Basil Davidson describes as "compartments above whose walls it was difficult or impossible to hear or see anything of value about neighbours near or far."<sup>5</sup> Brothers only in envy and corruption, people are united by what most divides them: they are together in the rivalry to "get ahead" which keeps them apart.

Class solidarity would be an anathema to the desired impression of fragmentation. Mass subscription to the totalitarian psychology of materialism ensures that there is really only one set of class values, a single harmony of division in which the oppressed worship their oppressors and the fragmented seek most strongly after what fragments them. The modern urban society of the first two novels consists of a collection of independent families, among which the privileged "connected" ones further their interests through the influence of relatives who are "big men" in the government. The result is a ruling elite opposed to an envious community which is in turn divided against itself. Armah has elsewhere<sup>6</sup> analysed modern African society in terms of class structures inherited from the colonial system and pilloried African leaders who deny the reality of class conflict in their states, but the novels' stark fictive categories of drivers and walkers, leapers and waiters, gleam-chasers and loved ones, educated elite and suffering masses cut across class complexities.

Thus, westernised Marxist analyses of society in the novels in terms of an "African proletariat",<sup>7</sup> an "apathetic working class",<sup>8</sup> or "the peasantry"<sup>9</sup> do not keep faith with their crude polarisation of humanity into brutal economic orders. The wee-smoking fringe-group of prostitute, artist and docker cuts across imported class frontiers and Minister Koomson is an uncouth, boorish dock-hand. The anonymity of the man, who seems remote from class identity, has little to do with any generic or allegoric significance as "working man" or "everyman" - in fact, he is atypical of his society and class of railway-clerks - and has much more to do with the existing order's refusal of an identity to one estranged from its values and its sheer incapacity for recognising value beyond its own narrow definitions. At the same time, the all-pervasive nature of materialism leads both the man and the mad Baako to internalise their families' values and apply their judgements to themselves. When "a man's value could only be as high as the cost of the things he could buy," the man finds himself a prey to momentary sensations of "a very strong happiness" when he is able to conform to expectations:

How was it possible for a man to control himself, when the admiration of the world, the pride of his family and his own secret happiness, at least for the moment, all demanded that he lose control of himself and behave like someone he was not and would never be? (p. 115)

Against the fragile assertion of identity in the last words, the separate elements of universal admiration, family pride and personal happiness come together as one, the first two declaring an insidious confederation with the third. The timber-trader's incredulity and Oyo's accusations leave the man with the feeling that his honesty is really a perverse selfishness and a social vice.

The contemporary fragmentation is presented as a recent development, specifically as a child of post-war chaos. In the long flashback of the first novel's sixth chapter, traditional ties of kinship and friendship break down in the animal competition for survival in what has become "an alien world impossible to hold." (p. 78) The soldiers return from the European war to a society "messy with destroyed souls and lost bodies." (p. 65) Having betrayed the community by fighting for its colonial oppressor, they find that the community, in its turn, betrays them by collapsing under the weight of the new wealth which they send home: they return to the anarchy of broken homes and faithless wives who have succumbed to the temptations of quick spending. Teacher adds the insight that the women, individually, betray because, as a historical community of women collectively represented by



Maanan, they have been repeatedly betrayed. (pp. 72-3) In Armah's sociology of the oppressed, violence in the vanishing communal body is directed inward against the oppressed self, not outward against the oppressor: Kofi Billy's suicidal violence is "turned finally inward to destroy the man who could not bear it." (p. 76) The materialism which is the disease of the time turns a community into so many "shattered worlds and selves," making vultures and gulls of competing individuals. (p. 66) In the new social order born from this chaos, disconnected communication-lines of telephones reflect the isolative self-seeking individualism which they serve and the elite's self-serving speed is mirrored in the handle of the railway-office pencil-sharpener which "sped round and round with the futile freedom of a thing connected to nothing else." (p. 17) "Connectedness" now belongs to a jettisoned past. In the new wealthy suburbia the walking man feels himself to be left behind by the rapid "passage of the houses" and the admiring comments of his small daughter sound "like words unconnected to anything." (p. 121) The new speed divides and disconnects. The germ of later ideas about the "connected" and "unconnected eye", reciprocity and the futile freedom of the separated individual, given more programmatic expression in Two Thousand Seasons, is already present.

The structure and stylistic devices of the first novel's sixth chapter dramatise this passage from community to fragmented individualism. It has been noticed that the interlocking dual-narrative of the two men presents what is really a collective autobiography of the childhood and youth of a new nation and its failed hopes.<sup>10</sup> The monotony of style and narrative continuity allow one "listening mind" to pick up vibrations left hanging by the other rememberer. The man's brief flicker of faith in new flowerings from dung (p. 85) echoes Teacher's vision of political enthusiasms born out of the anomy of the post-war years. Both narratives oscillate between defeatist pessimism and guarded hope, widening to embrace a defeated community and contracting again to the vision of two isolated men. The vision is neither a single one nor the pluralised one of Two Thousand Seasons, but appears to be the closest that Armah can get, at this stage, to the idea of a "communal view." The overlapping narratives contrive, however, to give the impression of a last surviving fragment of a broken community of minds, which inter-connect only to notate disconnection. Picking up the man's thought that "so much speed overturns the runner," Teacher associates "robbing those who had been kind to us" with "rushing down mossy bottoms of steep gutters with nothing to stop us..." (pp. 68-9) Ostensibly, the typifying, communalising vision of one unidentified boy in the orchard-raiding episode covers the experience of three and, ultimately, the whole of African boyhood. But the very sharp, lyrical rendering of individual

sensations of wonder and pain makes this a rather artificial notation of collective identity. It is the intense experience of one boy - now the man - generalised and abstracted into three, not the experience of three compressed into one. In the fourth of the seven alternating narratives, the splintering of the wee-group into its members' individual fates is reflected by the fracturing of the narrative into two more sharply distinct voices as the man begins to qualify and reject Teacher's despair and self-imposed isolation. "there are two communities, really," Juana tells the mad Baako in the final scene of Fragments, "and they don't coincide." (p. 275) Armah's two voices, repeated in Ocran and Baako, solo and Modin - the expatriated cynical despair and the defeated but still resilient vision of communal service - are held in tension in the narrative and then split into their separate selves. The man inherits enough of his dual or group identity and memory to recognise Maanan at the end of the novel but the chapter's linear speed and sharp segmentation into fractured phases - one for each year of the Independence government as represented by the progeric man-child - carry the diverging voices inexorably into the present's dichotomised order of goal-getting elites and atomized, negated communities.

In the contemporary order "the whole society," says Teacher - a society which labels justice-seekers saboteurs and nation-wreckers - is behind Oyo (p. 93) and Oyo is incapable of a dissenting opinion: at Koomson's fall she has no praise for the man's honesty, only surprised relief that it has paid off. At the coup a "trade-unionist" (which in the revised definitions of Ghanaian Socialism means another Party man) orders the clerks to go out and show their loyalty to the new powers. "With a silence that spoke everybody's shame," (p. 158) all, except the man, obey. Armah allows them their shame but their total submission, at a time when chains might be broken, argues for the non-existence of a "community" or "people" whose will is coherent enough to be distinguishable from that of its rulers and to be the target of individual identification. The community is a phantom, given what colour it has by the values of those in power and seeming to share little other than its highly symbolic, contagious filth.

But from the first novel's home-coming soldiers, forced by colonialism to fight against the interests of "those very people whose pain should have learned to fight..." (p. 65) to the educated been-to of the next two novels who finds himself pressed into the role of modern "factor" to further oppress the people he would serve, and the slaves-turned-guerillas of the historical epics, the overriding preoccupation of Armah's heroes is the same: to break the cycle of exploitation, to place some kind of social vision at the disposal of those who feel no need for it, to serve an absent community. This



community, however, exists usually in a lost world, looked mistily back to, and its degree of continuity with the new world of violent change is left vague and imponderable: Teacher says of the violence that, if it "was not something entirely new, at any rate the frequency and intensity of it were new things." (p. 64) The warrior-revenants who find it "impossible to survive the destruction of the world they had carried away with them in their departing heads" (p. 65) go mad and leave no testimony. The Teacher who, like them, dreams of faraway times and places and feeds himself the stimulants of foreign books and Afro-American music, speaks in large terms of "the destroyed people waking up and wanting to make themselves whole again." (p. 90) His proprietorial plural pronoun - "We also knew that we were the people to whom these oily men were looking for their support" (p. 82) - makes "the people" the object of his ecstatic, possibly unearned identification; it asserts a common wisdom that saw through the early leaders and a common sympathy with an imagined "popular will" or "voice fo the people" as expressed in the common man's pidgin. (p. 82) Some critics have taken these projections on the Teacher's own terms:

The novelist (Armah) shows that whereas the leaders feared but loved the white man the people in their despair feared and hated the coloniser. On the one hand there was gratitude and faith that led to imitation, on the other hand mistrust that leads to rejection.<sup>11</sup>

But these distinctions are the Teacher's, not the author's, and the mass-subscription to imitation-white values in Armah's contemporary dystopia does little to support the idea of a separate "will of the people" which is distinguishable from the will of the leaders. The Teacher's picture of a popular community of feeling needs to be looked at more closely and critically, and with a view to determining its status in the novel and in Armah's thought.

Teacher's monologue provides sketches of a few alienated individuals - most of them, like Maanan and Kofi Billy, centred around himself - against a featureless, undifferentiated canvas of the awakening "people" which is too vague to amount to a living human community. When the expected Utopia does not arrive, Teacher swings from a gratuitous idealisation of "the people" as the source of revolutionary energy and hope to a cynical dissociation of himself from "the whole society" which is behind Oyo and the loved ones (p. 93) and which now offers nothing for him to join and consume himself for. (p. 61) The people who provoke this about-face are themselves seen to see-saw from an incredulously dismissive cynicism towards the old leaders to a



collaborative one towards the new ones. In the past, Teacher is seen looking forward to the rising of the powerless: in the future which is the novel's present, he looks back nostalgically at the god that failed. Between these extreme positions there is little evidence of actual engagement with the people's ambitions and fates. Two closely connected limitations emerge from Teacher's behaviour: an almost solipsist withdrawal posing as commitment and an inability to experience time except in the projected forms of anticipation and retrospection.

Between Teacher's messianic hopes and disillusionment there is an unaccounted-for "pitiful shrinking of the world from those days Teacher still looked back to, when the single mind was filled with the hopes of a whole people." (p. 162) It is not clear whether the single mind here is full of the hopes of a people or the hopes of a people are appropriated by and reduced to a single mind. It has been noticed that behind Teacher's projections of his ideals onto a "community" that has no use for them lurks the western cult of the artist, abused and misunderstood.<sup>12</sup> "And no-one wants what I happen to have. It's only words, after all." The man then speaks of "the connectedness of words" (p. 79) but Teacher uses Plato's allegory of the cave to plead the folly of the enlightened individual's attempt to connect with a benighted community. (p. 80) The later writings of Armah would suggest that the boy-singer of the fishermen in Fragments or even the dock-singer in this novel, organically rooted in and "connected" with their local working communities, are more able to offer something of value, to give back to the society an accurate, working vision of itself, and thus to be accepted, than the westernised recluse extrapolated from plato. Much has been made of the apparent placing of the discovery of the communal will and community's salvation at the hands of isolated heroic individuals in Armah's early novels. Gerald Moore argues that "redemption can only be the reward of collective struggle, not a boon - a sort of golden apple - delivered to us by a lone, questing hero who searches and suffers for an indifferent community."<sup>13</sup> Chidi Amuta considers it to be "the paradox of Armah's art that he opts for a society based on community while confining the heroic functions to single individuals, who are incapable of championing the communal cause,"<sup>14</sup> and, in a different article, has the misgiving "that the very fact of creating visionary protagonists who do nothing physically about their decadent societies,"<sup>15</sup> necessarily makes Armah a pessimistic African novelist." But the man is not conceived after heroic patterns, visionary though his consciousness may often be. The Teacher, "unwilling to move closer to those of his old friends who were now in power" (p. 79) and sunk in a monastic isolation that lets him "keep quiet and not get close

to people," (p. 93) is never intended as a satisfactory spokesman or possible saviour of the community: his version of it, more idea than reality and filtered through uncompromising, polarised absolutes, is of doubtful value. Teacher's spurious personal assumption of the collective burden of hope and despair on behalf of the whole society is a conscious projection of the will which is quite different from the man's quiet interiorisation of common sufferings as part of his unconscious ritual role, something which Armah makes the special preserve of the passive consciousness or "listening mind." But the merely symbolic carrying away, by an estranged outsider, of a portion of the collective corruption as a service to the community does "nothing physically" about real evil - on the level of realistic action, it helps evil to escape - and this would seem to support Amuta's designation of "pessimist." The rescue of Koomson, the individual specimen of political corruption, works in opposition to the idea of deliverance by a champion. On the other hand, the man, who is never a "lone, questing hero" but is always "in the middle", caught in the crossfire between family and gleam and unable to go forward or back, does provide, under sufferance, a recipe for living in a totally corrupt world and a more realistic experience of human community. In some ways the man echoes the Teacher to whom he deludedly looks for guidance. He succumbs to despair, he is at times tempted by political unrealities like "moving a whole people forward," (p. 94) and he is tempted by a similarly paranoid polarisation of humanity into loved ones who pursue the gleam and those who are victimised for not doing so. But the man, unlike Teacher, has to live in the world and his actions speak of a more positive and pragmatic approach to co-existence with corruption, which weighs against his idealism: for example, the enforced maintenance of the Koomson connection, his patient endurance of a boat-deal he cannot prevent, and his honest confession that he is not even sure that he hates the new materialism. (p. 92) Above all, there is his strangely happy response to the book's last bribe which evinces a more discriminating, if compromised, view of the place and role of corruption in the modern community and a broader tolerance of the less dishonourable ways in which individuals come to terms with corruption as a way of living.

The man's gradual growing away from the Teacher is given special emphasis at the point of parting. As he hears Teacher's last words, the man observes how

...the naked bulbs of street lamps shed a little light on holes in the back walls of bathrooms filled with strands from communal sponges cemented with the green moss and old suds killed with dirt and sweat so long ago, and the water still trickling out. (p. 94)



This is, of course, imagined rather than seen. The man's thoughts run habitually on ancient accumulations of dirt and time preserved in filth. But there seems to be more in the man's mind here. The personal purification of individuals blocks with dirt the drain which should carry the dirt away, and, coming after the Teacher's defence of his self-willed isolation, it is hard to resist the intimation of his preening of his own self-regarding moral cleanliness at the expense of a besmirched community. As he takes leave of his friend's immobilised solitude, the man returns to the more purposive element of slow walking and feels an intense desire for contact, generated in the wake of Teacher's claustrophobic seclusion from the world. Teacher's idealistic rejection of the deathly materialism of the present and his talk of "old libations of living blood" (p. 61) have been seen by at least one critic<sup>16</sup> to contain suggestions of a timeless and mythical pretechnological Africa. The man's thoughts at parting appear to lend some support to this idea:

Having the whiteness of stolen bungalows and the shine of stolen cars flowing past him, he could think of reasons, of the probability that without the belittling power of things like these we would all continue to sit underneath old trees and weave palm wine dreams of beauty and happiness in our amazed heads. (p. 94)

It is a shrewd comment on Teacher's romantic purism: there is no sweetness here, so it must all have been there. The past community is defined negatively as the opposite of what is now. The fallacy invokes Wole Soyinka's warning that the past "is not a fleshpot for escapist indulgence, and it is vitally dependent on the sensibility that recalls it."<sup>17</sup> Teacher's romantic primitivism is the other side of his desire for future perfection: in both there is a refusal to engage with the present, a desire to escape the experience of time. If the man can be seen to ritually carry off the accumulated corruption of seven years, in the form of Koomson, and thus symbolically annul the period of the Nkrumah regime, then Teacher, by analogy, rightly belongs to those traditional societies which, according to Mircea Eliade,<sup>18</sup> seek a return which cancels the whole of history. The man's use of "we" and "all" in this passage ironically echoes Teacher's fantasy of fraternity with the masses and there is an implied equation of Teacher's unworldly tranquillity with the primitive stagnation of village life. It is instructive to compare this romanticism with the man's own childhood remembrances. The orchard-raiding trauma is shot through with the poignancies of bright sunlight, beautiful grass, gentle rain and pure water. But the childhood idyll of an innocent, golden Edenic Africa is brutally interrupted by the violent new order of speed which overturns the runner: the episode of the dog-chase is



frighteningly paradigmatic for post-colonial Africa in its vision of savage black oppression under distant white control. (pp. 67-8) The paradisaical image is no sooner created than shattered: it exists only at the level of nostalgic reverie and it is to this level that the Teacher's drugged or alcoholic "dreams of beauty and happiness," of the waking nation divesting itself of whiteness and returning to its true African self, are reduced by the man's analogies. Such visions are seldom seen, in this novel, except as idealised projections of childhood and adolescence. Significantly, most of the experiences of "timelessness" in the novel are in the past, as if this mode of preception was itself extinct.

Armah's depiction of the modern community is bleak. It is endowed with no social cohesion, no coherence of political status or identity. It is the creature of its ruling powers and expresses no ideas which are separable from theirs. The idea of a post-colonial communal consciousness is exposed as an untenable hypothesis. Materialism masquerading as socialism speedily profits a few and the Teacher's opposing spirit of silent idealism serves no-one. The flux of genuine living community is to be found neither in accelerated urban materialism nor in the stagnant "happiness" of traditional village life to which Teacher's fossilised paralysis obliquely refers.

Integral to the vanishing traditional community in Armah's work is what <sup>19</sup>to some critics <sup>20</sup>has seemed an unrealistically vanishing or rejected family system. In this, Armah appears to violate all the traditional sanctities. Children are cause for mourning, not joy: for the man they mean the caesarian scar that deadens desire and increased pressure to acquire things - "for the children" who envy the children of the gleam. (p. 145) Oyo's pregnancy traps the man in the deadness of familial materialism. Teacher depicts the new Ghana and its independent regime, born out of the war, as a violent death-child, an Akan "amomawu" doomed to its repetition of premature deaths. Everywhere in the novels children have more to do with death than with birth and the deathliness of the interlocking, supposedly communalising African family system is rooted in its service of urban materialism.

Post-Independence studies of social change in West Africa have found that behaviour patterns tied to the sanctions of the family system survive, often <sup>21</sup>intact, their transposition from rural to urban communities. But in Armah's first two novels the radical break made by urban society is less with the system than with its proper and intended usage. The extended family structure, once the linchpin of the traditional community, acted as a theoretical bulwark against

social discontent and the threat of social revolution by ensuring some share of prosperity for all. That it did not always work this way in practice is clear from the writer's satiric attack on the Independence myth of "the communal bliss ...of this virtuous old Africa"<sup>22</sup> which colonialism was supposed to have swept away and on which the "Socialisms" of Nkrumah, Nyerere and Senghor were bogusly based. But in the altered circumstances of a wealth-concentrating, centralised nation-state, the system does not work at all and, since no new system has evolved to replace the obsolete one, its natural capacity for corrupt abuse and perversion is magnified until the deformity becomes the body. Only a few families have power and influence, gathering more wealth into fewer hands; instead of serving the community, the system undermines it by turning the interests of a few powerful careerists and their families, whose lives are geared to hedonistic ethics, against those of the mass of excluded, unrepresented families treading a slow, unprogressive round in the society below. As Baako claims in the second novel, the return of cargo by the westernised been-to serves only the false communities of selected "loved ones" at the expense of the larger community. When the providers fall from favour, their relations' dreams of wealth have to disappear into "the long days of pain ahead" and a new set of families enjoy their hoped-for favours. (pp. 159, 162) The family, like the state, has ceased to be a solidarity of reciprocal interests and has become a means for one-way manipulation: the grand crystallising image of the white fish's cannibalised body draws together in a logical chain the power-elite scrambling after white power from the corpse of colonialism, the cannibalised communal body fed off by a few families and the family members themselves, feeding parasitically upon the single providing member, imitation-white and spiritually dead. (p. 124) In the first novel the ubiquitous system draws everything into itself: even the man's ritual carrying off of the communal burden is an unintended expression of family loyalty, upholding ironically against the community's interests a solidarity with a family system that no longer works. It fails to function even within its own terms, for cargo does not travel very far from the centre: from the "partnership" in the owning of the boat, Koomson's distant relatives get only a short-lived meagre supply of fish. The traditional pattern is inverted: the bull feeds from the egret, the big fish from the little ones. Greed is furthered by a system originally designed to check such excesses.

The paradoxical result is that self-seeking individualism becomes the new communal faith and anyone with a surviving spirit of community is cut off from the body which his beliefs are intended to serve. When tempted by the thought that the envious cravings of materialism might be a force for the



communal good, the man has to remind himself that "hard work" is a myth manufactured by a leisured autocracy, a euphemism for organised idleness, bribery, connivance and secret theft that installs a corrupt few in prosperity. The latrine graffiti - "WHO BORN FOOL/SOCIALISM CHOP MAKE I CHOP" - flaunts a cynical acceptance of the false sharing by mutually corrupt, cut-taking partners which is really a refinement of the much-abused family system. This is the reality behind "this foolish socialism" that Estella Koomson complains of. The public body bears this weight of private welfare: "CONTREY BROKE." (p. 106) The corrupt conductor of the ruined social bus, first cowering and then complacent in his guilt, extends the burden of his corruption to his detector in a similar fraternity of fraud, a false community of corruption: "You see, we can share." (p. 5) The fugitive Koomson twists out of its proper meaning an ancient proverb of community - "When the bull grazes, the egret also eats" - to serve his desperate personal need. The suspicious boatman's surly response indicates that "time and change ought to modify the truth of all such proverbs." (p. 174) But the current time-ethic which provides huge short-term gratification for the "bull", a few pickings for the smaller animals in his immediate vicinity, and nothing for the rest, has irreversibly "modified" the saying from its original drift. It is now another piece of debris left over from the fallen regime, like the "stranded debris" in the boatman's soup. (p. 173) It has been petrified into permanence and is incapable of further modification except in the same direction. The damage done is irrevocable, as to the lost community and moral order which the debased proverb refers to. Koomson, in office, has never applied it properly and does not now. Even though the "bull" has not much left to give, he goes free by passing on a little of his accumulated store to the lower animals who have no desire to bring him down because they are trained to profit from him, even in his decline. Traditional expressions of community, such as gifts of kola and eating, are habitually removed from ancient contexts and twisted into bribes for the mutual benefit of individuals. Even the boatman's "ancient dignity of formal speech" - "So my mouth is closed, as my ears are open, in order that I may hear what you bring with you" (p. 174) - is another debased ritual, seeking in the customary gift of the traveler the expected bribe of the escapee. The past, whether it be communalist paradise or slave-capitalism, is disengaged, discarded or debased by the new order of historical change. The third element here - that of an impairing, perverting continuity - is one of problematic uncertainty: the past's openness to, and capacity for, corruption - the ancient dignities, the family system - are preserved. In Fragments, libation is a pretext for Uncle Foli's bibulous indulgence, Korankye's sacrifice of the ram to mark the coming of the child is desecrated by an irreverence



more appropriate to a drunken feast, and the greedy acceleration of the outdoor ritual perversely speeds Araba's child in and out of the world before it has completed its "birth". The Mammy Water myth is reduced to Akosua Russell's abominable poem.

At the edge of Armah's urban nightmare there is, however, a haunting backcloth of singing, working people left over from the traditional community whose life of "palm wine dreams" the man looks sceptically back to in Chapter Seven.\* (p. 94) These figures - fishermen, gardeners, villagers, praise-singers, hunchbacks - ghost through the first two novels in vestigial, deracinated form. They seem to have little to do with the glittering materialism, the demonic gleam of the present but they are heavily suggestive of alternative values and a time-consciousness closer to the man's own.

Here is Koomson's tribal gardener:

Near the wall on the far side a gardener, very tall and thin, so that he seemed to bend like a reed, was watering an expanse of lush grass. His face was completely covered with a mesh of thin lines cut into the flesh, and he was singing in a voice that was low and calm, except for an occasional sharp cry that rose and separated itself from the main song. Around a corner of the house a young girl in blue jeans and a light yellow shirt came riding, stopping just as she was about to run into the two. (pp. 143-4)

The sense of a slow, distanced presence and the man's suddenly intensifying song recall the dock-singer's plaintive marginal music which immediately precedes the man's brief lyrical ecstasy at the end of Chapter Eight. It also looks forward to the fisher-boy's song in Fragments. The difference is that this man no longer has an audience. He is a quaint survival, a small pocket of innate organic harmony, uprooted from a vanished past and a community in which the song might have meaning, and bending like a reed before the pressures of the new world. High-speed Africa bursts into his slow dignified rhythms in the form of Koomson's speeding daughter, sporting a royal name and speaking like a white child, and the momentary link with an ancient past is abruptly severed. The next working man we meet is koomson's colonial-styled servant, performing steward-boy antics for the black-white man who is his master. The past preserved is brought into swift and brutal contrast with the past destroyed.

---

\* A version of the following material appeared in the author's article, "Tradition and the Vision of the Past in the Early novels of Ayi Kwei Armah." English in Africa, 12, 2 (1985).

Another such survival is the ironic praise-singer, the licensed critic of traditional society who endures, in the Teacher's fringe-community, in the form of Etse (the reverse of Estie, the Koomson-wife, who is impervious to irony).<sup>23</sup> His mockery of Party men and their self-appointed messiahs is the traditional act of love and protection performed on behalf of the community: "I wonder in what strange countries Etse is roaming now, driven away by something he loved at first." (p. 83) The new regime takes itself too seriously to tolerate this kind of love. Significantly, Etse's last satiric impersonation is interrupted by Maanan's bringing news of the new leader Nkrumah, who will eventually shut down all opposition and usher in an era of mindless materialism that will make intellectual and spiritual values redundant. "Even Etse could find nothing to joke about, though the threat that everything was turning serious was killing him inside." (p. 87) Even in the novel's past, Etse's role is a self-conscious revival of something gone. In the present what is left of his function has passed to the "praise-singing seller" of bread who lauds Koomson as "my white man" (p. 37), the mother-in-law who is "lost in admiration of the Party man's chubby profile" (p. 130), and the Party-toadies who grow "greasy and fat singing the praises of their chief." (162) The past is preserved but perverted, so the spirit is lost: there is no irony in the praise of the new chief. The man cultivates a clown-like role, becoming everyone's object of ridicule and putting the praise-singer's mischievous questions about the boat-deal to Koomson but he is immediately silenced by the mother-in-law's "flaming look." (p. 131) (Baako refers to himself as "the clown" and plays a similar dissenting role in the chapter "Iwu", which deals with the death of Araba's child in Fragments.)<sup>24</sup>

The traditional African time-consciousness makes a brief appearance at the railway office to give support to the man's yearning for a mode of time more meaningful than the undifferentiated "heaviness" that hangs over him. After discovering the fraudulent work of the absent clerk, who has "extended his free time by sending a long series of telegrams claiming the death of one after the other of a whole clan of relatives" (p. 155), the man speculates that

...if some woman comes from a village wanting to know such things and asked them straight what exactly it was they spent their time doing, they would never be able to give a real answer. A job is a job. It did not matter at all that nothing was done on most jobs. (p. 156)

The two time-modes come into collision for a moment. On the one hand there is the villager's traditional time-continuum,



organically attuned to the seasonal work and events that happen in it and the subsequent inability to conceive of time without event - Gerald Moore's "projection from living experience,"<sup>25</sup> or J.S. Mbiti's "composition of events."<sup>26</sup> The seasonal rhythms are linked with the parallel cycle of human growth and decay, which urban political life perversely accelerates, and a stage in this cycle is the 'special time' of the funeral which allows a certain period for the dead man to rejoin his ancestors. On the other hand, there is the urban clerk's contingent, mechanically-shaped time, expandable and reducible, arbitrarily broken into artificial divisions of "working time" and "free time". The conventional divisions are meaningless because they are unrelated to any organic necessity, because no work is done and because "work" and "free" time alike are conditioned by enslavement to the values of the gleam. The job, like the time-mode it exists in, has an autonomous life, regardless of the use it is put to: the job/time exist independently of work/events happening in them. The clerk blasphemously exploits the values of the traditional mode of time which still govern the village funeral to extend a quite different mode of time from the urban world. The cyclic conceptualisation of time still features as a part of contemporary experience but, as far as its actual application in ordinary life is concerned, it exists only at the level of ironic manipulation and the satiric distance of the acquisitive city-dweller. The clerk's imposture recalls Sagoe's sarcasm on "our orgiastic funerals" in Soyinka's The Interpreters: "...a man could spend his entire life just feasting on a dead man. And many did."<sup>27</sup> Funeral rites, and the traditional time-order that governs their observance, are like old proverbs, praise-songs and libations in the contemporary settings of Armah's novels: they are a matter of convenience and expedience. They are kept on from the traditional order, along with remnants from colonialism, usually in a diluted or polluted form and recourse is hard to them when useful or profitable. The same ruthless pragmatism dispenses with traditional practices when this ceases to be the case: Oyo turns the beggar-woman away without the requested sugar.

These marginal confrontations with the traditional past need to be reconciled with Armah's conceptions of history and the varied experience of time which finds expression in the novels. Discussing the workings of rapid change in the modernizing of Africa, J.Z. Kronenfeld considers the alternatives of "the selective adaptation to new institutions, and the incorporation of new ideas or practices into existent institutions..."<sup>28</sup> and, referring to Soyinka's play The Lion and the Jewel, shows that people use the "traditional" for "modern" purposes and the "modern" for "traditional" purposes, as needs arise. But Armah's reiteration, in fiction and



polemic, of Africa's failure to model new ideologies and institutions as alternatives to carbon copies of western structures - its "subscribing to an ethic that has everything to do with consumption and notoriously little to do with production of any sort"<sup>29</sup> - makes such reciprocity impossible. Under the pressure of westernised historical change, his modern Ghanaians import novelties from elsewhere and adapt and pervert existing traditions. In the light of its failure to evolve "new institutions" and in the absence of "new ideas", the modern state unimaginatively re-fashions old ones. It is a one-way process: "tradition" is seen from the distance of a departing present and so in its modernised version, never in its pristine, intrinsic pre-perverted state. This leaves vague the extent to which the tradition collaborates with its own disfigurement. Armah's accordance of so little energy, either of repudiation or redesign, to his contemporary Africans tempts the conclusion that past forms lend themselves aggressively to corruption and largely transform themselves. On the one hand, the absence of the traditional community from the early novels invites a negatively idealistic definition of it in terms of everything which the modern community from the early novels invites a negatively idealistic definition of it in terms of everything which the modern community is not, denying it any reciprocal right of reply. This leads to the impression that "all pretensions to traditionalism and cultural authenticity amount, at best, to a mockery of something dead and distant or a celebration of a pervasively obnoxious new arrangement."<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, there is a strong feeling that traditions potent with corruption are not dead but anciently alive and in viscous contact with the present, and that their retention has to do with the ways in which they have conspired with their infiltration by modern materialism. The forty-day funeral was always an invitation to abuse, carrying in itself the germ of the clerk's fraudulent "long leave of funerals": At its distance from the ignorant modern metropolis it is merely easier to exploit. Kola gifts and the boatman's "ancient dignities" of welcome and proverb are rituals which contain the seeds of their own corruption. The malpractices are kept on with a lazy passivity as this requires the least invention. Time and change do not disconnect but disfigure them, without revealing either the degree of continuity or of original deformity. What is inherited and preserved is the past's capacity to yield to corruption.

In conversation about his novel This Earth, My Brother..., Kofi Awoonor made the following revelation:

I saw the traditional society almost stupidly as a golden age, a beautiful and sinless kind of world. I no longer have that perception. I'm aware that

corruption is an essential aspect of the human condition, and I'm<sup>31</sup> aware that suffering comes out of that condition.

Armah does not arrive at this position but starts at it. His first essay bristles with a sardonic abrasiveness about the romance of African Communalism and affiliated nostalgias which would make the vision of the later writing look weakly sentimental were it not for the fact that the histories do not really seek to return to mythical African beginnings but discover in the familiar cyclic repetitions a continuing historical purpose: they are concerned less with the real past than with constructs for Africa's future and possible destiny. The Communalist idea of traditional society as a huge support-system dispensing life-giving warmth and humanity for the welfare of the many is dismissed in favour of an equally selective but more historical version of the past unearthed by the cult of Nkrumah's African Personality. This is the tradition of an elitist African past,

...a tradition based on instances of past African opulence and magnificence, generally of a very vulgar, decidedly unsocialistic type, peppered with the names of famous kings and glorious empires... The necessity of sumptuous consumption for the purpose of global exhibition of self is explicit... In the system of the African Personality, pomp and circumstance, status symbols, teams of linguists, all were necessary and made sense.

...But underneath all the onslaught (of colonialism), the old communalist values, though somewhat battered, maintained some sort of integrity, so that with the culmination of the anti-colonialist struggle in Independence, it would be possible to reconstruct Communalism... As to the location in time and space of this virtuous old Africa, the available formulae are vague and at times unhistorical tales of kings dressed in scintillating robes, possessing countless slaves and spending gold with grand insouciance...

...Conspicuous waste of resources in conditions of scarcity is not one of the tenets of Socialism.<sup>32</sup>

The essay's strife-torn elitist version of the past is borne out by the portraits of the Akan slave-kings in Two Thousand Seasons and by the brief retrospections to Koomson's prototypes and the metaphorical insistence on the antiquity of corruption in the first novel. Nowhere in Armah is there a simple opposition between a positively-valued traditional communalism and a negatively-valued modern individualism, and nowhere is it suggested that the man's purely personal code of honour has been inherited from and belongs properly to a lost



community. "Old Africa," writes G.C.M. Mutiso of the first two novels, "does not survive in the present society since it is by definition spiritual and this is the negation of materialism."<sup>33</sup> A wise antidote to such untenable, absolutist crudities is Gerald Moore's restatement of Mary Kingsley's observations on the closeness of spiritual and material things in traditional Africa, making possible the acquisition of material ends by spiritual means and vice-versa. Even Naana, the least worldly character in Fragments, is not exempt from this spiritualised materialism. According to Moore, this concept helps to explain how modern Africans "have been able to move in a single stride from the traditional world of careful spiritual guidance and social management to the world of naked opportunism and materialism..."<sup>34</sup> The presiding time-theory of returning cycles in the first novel establishes the continuity between Africa's supposedly selfless, communal spirituality and the West's egocentric materialism.

D.S. Izevbaye<sup>35</sup> has argued that many contemporary African novelists opt for a rectilinear, "progressive" interpretation of African history to stress the unique and merely temporary character of the colonial interlude, which is not to be pessimistically construed as a continuing historical recurrence. Thus African writers, with paradoxical irony, adopt European concepts of historical time in order to minimize the European impact on African history. Armah does not opt for this particular escape-route from a bleak determinism of recurring African "colonialisms", but thinks in terms of cycles of continuity. He chooses neither the "progressive" linearised Marxism of Ngugi or Sembene Ousmane nor the idea of nonrepetitive, reversible or alternating Yeatsian cycles which emerges at the end of Yambo Ouloguem's Beats to Violence.<sup>36</sup> The first novel deals with Independent Africa's self-repeating cycle of slavish dependence on the white world and the treadmill-lives forced upon the inhabitants caught within it. The next two novels are concerned with the breaking of a "factor-cycle" through which that white world continues to lead a posthumous existence in Africa. The histories chart the quasi-seasonal course of a cycle of colonial sell-outs to "white destroyers" through African history.

And yet, this theoretical background notwithstanding, Armah's contemporary figures are troubled by a feeling of final and overwhelming loss, a nagging recognition of something older and better but modified by time and change: something not entirely accounted for by the distortions of the man's sunlit reminiscences of boyhood or of Baako's romance of the "illiterate people" and their myths, and not allayed by the careful dissociation of author and character from Teacher's nostalgia. The saturative Akan mythology of

Fragments gives to even the most degraded ritual a weight of traditional worth which survives its violation by an impatient materialism, creating a tension between selected past and present corruption. Scattered through the first two novels are glimpses of an alternative time-consciousness and intimations of community which are now so rare and fragile in the prevailing ethos of an isolating, goal-getting individualism that they appear as survivals from another world. Such moments are the brief communion during the radio-song at Teacher's house, the wee-induced visions, the man's sea-shore epiphanies and the song of the fisher-boy which Baako sees as "giving those men something they didn't have." (p. 185) But the personal codes which are informed by these insights relate neither to the world around Baako and the man nor to any other presented or conceived world and thus lack any external point of reference.

Questioning of the past is not confined to the long-distance retrospections of the man and Naana to Koomson's and Foli's treacherous prototypes. The burden of past corruption - imaged by mountains of filth and shit which imply that all the unexpelled dirt of Africa's history is still in existence - is seen not as a dead weight but as a still potent, living force, a liquid or viscous flux of pollution which the man feels still sticking to him during his ritual cleansing in the sea. The symbolic filth on the latrine walls is still alive, "drying on the can for ages, but had never quite arrived at a totally dry crispness." (p. 167) The gutters still run with "old mixtures of piss and shit." (170) Compacted mud holds old rotten cans together on the shore and ancient rust keeps the city bus from falling apart. The banister's "organic" rot - "a very long piece of diseased skin" - symbolises the inherited, compelling dynamism of corruption which converts all newness to its own "victorious filth." (p. 12)

In Armah's novels the symbolism seems to go in one direction, sentiment in the other. The view of time as historical recurrence or as hoarded accumulation of evils in a cycle of consumption, waste and disposal, is not consistent with the notion that certain ideal qualities of permanent value have been the special preserve of, and have been irrecoverably lost in, a vanished era's perfect community. What the man learns in the first novel - even before the closing encounter with Maanan - is that there are no Utopias, prospective or retrospective, to feed glib faiths and fatalisms like those of Teacher. In reality, there are no perfect beginnings or future goodness, no final answers, no saviours or special survivors from better times. There is no sweetness here - or there.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ayi Kwei Armah, The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born (London, Heinemann, 1969) p. 90. Subsequent references are given in the text of the article and are taken from the reset 1975 Heinemann edition.

<sup>2</sup> Ayi Kwei Armah, Fragments (London: Heinemann, 1974) pp. 207-213. Subsequent references from this edition are given in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Ayi Kwei Armah, Why Are We So Blest? (London: Heinemann, 1972) p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> Ayi Kwei Armah, "A Mystification: African Independence Revalued." Pan-African Journal, 2,2(1969), pp. 147-8.

<sup>5</sup> Basil Davidson, Africa in History (St. Albans: Paladin, 1974) p. 316.

<sup>6</sup> Ayi Kwei Armah, "African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific?" Présence Africaine 64(1967), pp. 6-30.

\* <sup>7</sup> Ben Obumsele, "Marx, Politics and the African Novel." Twentieth Century Studies 10(1973), p. 116.

\* <sup>8</sup> Simon Simonse, "African Literature Between Nostalgia and Utopia." Research in African Literatures 13,4(1982), p. 474.

<sup>9</sup> David Maugham-Brown, "Interpreting and 'The Interpreters': Wole Soyinka and Practical Criticism." English in Africa 6,2(1978), p. 55.

<sup>10</sup> Gareth Griffiths, "Structure and Image in Armah's 'The Beautiful Ones...'" Studies in Black Literature 2,2(1971), 5

<sup>11</sup> F.I. Case, "La bourgeoisie africaine dans la littérature de l'Afrique occidentale." Canadian Journal of African Studies 7,2(1973), p. 264.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Fraser, The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah (London: Heinemann, 1980), p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> Gerald Moore, "Death, Convergence and Rebirth in Two Black Novels." Nigerian Journal of the Humanities 2(1978), p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Chidi Amuta, "Ayi Kwei Armah and the Mythopoesis of Mental Decolonisation." Ufahamu 10, 3(1981), p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> Chidi Amuta, "The Contemporary African Artist in Armah's Novels." World Literature Written in English 21,3(1982), p. 473.

<sup>16</sup> Griffiths, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Wole Soyinka, "The Writer in an African State." Transition 31(1967), p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Mircea Eliade, The Myth of the Eternal Return (Princeton University Press, 1974).

<sup>19</sup> Chinua Achebe, Morning Yet on Creation Day (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 26.

<sup>20</sup> Obumselu, pp. 114-115.

<sup>21</sup> P.C. Lloyd, Africa in Social Change (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 115-116.

<sup>22</sup> Armah, "African Socialism....," p. 24.

<sup>23</sup> Etse may owe something to the satire of the Asafo Companies of Armah's own Fante-speaking area of Akan culture, described in Denis Duerden, African Art & Literature: The Invisible Present (London: Heinemann, 1975), pp. 128-131.

<sup>24</sup> Armah, Fragments, pp. 257-268.

<sup>25</sup> Gerald Moore, "Time and Experience in African Poetry." Transition 26(1966), p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> J.S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy (London: Heinemann, 1969), p. 17.

<sup>27</sup> Wole Soyinka, The Interpreters (London: Heinemann, 1970) p. 112.

<sup>28</sup> J.Z. Kronenfeld, "The Communalistic African and the Individualistic Westerner" in B. Lindfors (ed.): Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Literatures (London: Heinemann, 1970) p. 250.

<sup>29</sup> Armah, "African Socialism....," 15. This sentiment is echoed in Naana's reference to modern Africans' "great haste to consume things we have taken no care or trouble to produce." Fragments, p. 284.

<sup>30</sup> Amuta, "The Contemporary African Artist....," 471.



<sup>31</sup>B. Lindfors (ed.), Palaver: Interviews with Five African Writers (Austin: African Research Institute, University of Texas, 1972), p. 55.

<sup>32</sup>Armah, "African Socialism...", 22-4.

<sup>33</sup>G.C.M. Mutiso, "African Socio-Political Process: A Model from Literature" in Gurr & Zirimu (eds.), Black Aesthetics (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1973), p. 165.

<sup>34</sup>Gerald Moore, "The Debate on Existence in African Literature." Presence Africaine 81(1972), 47.

<sup>35</sup>D.S. Izevbaye, "Time in the African Novel." Journal of Commonwealth Literature 17,1(1982), pp. 80, 85.

<sup>36</sup>Y. Ouologuem, Bound to Violence transl. R. Mannheim (London: Heinemann, 1971), pp. 174-5.