

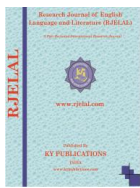


DE-SCRIBING EUROCENTRIC CULTURAL CODES IN FRANCIS ATEH'S *SEAT OF THORNS*

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Abstract

This paper examines the conflict between Western and African religious practices and the strategies employed by Francis Ateh to resolve the oppositional trends in a post-colonial Anglophone Cameroonian countryside represented in *Seat of Thorns*. The problem underlying this research is that the rejection of the culture of the indigenes has led to conflict and cultural inertia. The religious practices of the indigenous people in the novel are continuously described as savage and pagan by the authorities of the Roman Catholic Church because of the inability of the latter to consider the positive aspects of indigenous culture. This paper is therefore predicated on the idea that the enculturation of certain African religious practices in church rituals in *Seat of Thorns* is a potent means to ameliorate upon the worship of God and develop the zeal for adherence to Christianity in the indigenes of the Cameroonian society. This paper highlights the various measures employed by the author to deconstruct Eurocentric stereotypical utterances, and the association of cultural models from both the Christian tradition and the local tradition in moments when characters seek to attain God. The analyses shed more light on scholarship as the novel revisits the clash of cultures that has been continuously presented by other Cameroonian authors. The representation of this theme in a contemporary novel shows how the inability of most African communities to reconcile cultural differences has been perennial and has kept Africans in a death-like cultural state for many decades. The theoretical framework chosen for this paper is the postcolonial theory. The concepts of otherness, resistance and hybridity are used in the analyses. The analyses show that acculturation is ideal in reconciling oppositional cultural viewpoints for contemporary Africa. The Indigenous Church of God created at the end of the novel is a prototype of the ideal church today for it embraces positive aspects of African religious system, local colouring like indigenous dresses, songs, dances, instruments and consumerist habits in church rituals.

Key Words: Conflict, Postcolonial, Enculturation, Eurocentrism, Otherness, Hybridity

1. Introduction

This paper seeks to examine the manner in which the coming together of Western and African religious practices create animosity, a hybrid site of confusion, and the strategies

employed by Francis Ateh to resolve the oppositional trends in the post-colonial African society represented in *Seat of Thorns*. This clash of cultures has been presented by many authors since colonial times, in the various spaces where there are marked differences between the attitudes of

the colonising powers and those of the colonised. The latter are expected to be passive in order to be enlightened and 'salvaged' from 'savagery' by the 'magnanimity' of the colonial administrators, educators and clerics. This cultural enlightenment during the colonial epoch was aimed at debilitating the minds of the colonised and foster the colonialist project. This paper probes into the representation of Christianity by the Roman Catholic faith in *Seat of Thorns*. From an administrative viewpoint, authority in colonial lands has been redefined because of decolonisation, which has transferred control of political power from the colonial master to the natives.

Christianity and some European languages in contemporary Africa are the vestiges of colonialism that developed a stronghold in Africa and bear great weight on people's thinking pattern, affinities, social mobility and accessibility into certain circles. In some colonial societies like Umofia in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, some of the Igbos accepted Christianity in order to flee from certain indigenous practices such as the throwing of twins for death in the evil forest and the robust expectations from men imposed by the capitalist economic system. In other cases, one needed to accept Christian doctrine in order to be considered pious, honest, civilised and fit to function in the colonial system that rejected anything that was linked to indigenous cultures. In any case, Christianity like any other aspect of Western culture was resisted psychologically or physically as many indigenes often question the logic of some of the tenets of this foreign religion. The clash is obvious since many perspectives and aspects of worship in Christianity presented by the Roman Catholic Church are diametrically opposed to African traditional religion. There are moments when the deity presented by the white priests is considered a wicked god¹. Besides this, some critics of African literature totally reject Christianity and

¹ In KenjoJumbam's *The White Man of God*, the god of the white man is considered wicked because of his ability to allow a sinful soul burn in hell forever. Yaya who defends indigenous culture sees no saving grace in this religion that will punish a soul in fire forever. She claims that the god of Africans will punish for a while and later on allow the person to rest in peace.

claim that it presents a lot of contradictions. One of them is Kofi Awoonor who intimates that:

The nature of Christian theology presented a primary conflict in the minds of Africans. The doctrine of the trinity was to a large degree antithetical to African religions. God the father, his son Jesus and his brother the Holy Ghost were remote divine personages who seemed to have withdrawn from the world without leaving any religious authority recognizable to Africans. The confusions between the Old Testament and the New were self-evident. The full and complete revelation of God and His divinity could only come through the personality of His son: it was through him that the father could be reached. Men could not, apparently come to him through knowledge of the universal forces that surrounded him and bore on him at every turn. For Africans, Christian theology placed God too remote from man in time and space. (The Breast of the Earth 22)

In Christian's theology, God is identified in three persons, which is contrary to African tradition perception of God. God from an African perspective is unique and supreme to any physical or spiritual body. Also, some Africans do not understand how they can attain God since there is no conciliator between the trinity and man. This is because in African traditional religion there is a belief that people can only have access to God through the ancestors. The latter have lived with them, recognize their voices and can therefore link them to God. The theory of those two religions is therefore quite contradictory. The contradiction, the clash between characters and the perspectives for contemporary Cameroonian society will underlie the analyses in this paper.

The Cameroonian society is a crossroad of cultures and this places it in a stasis whereby forging a real identity becomes very difficult. The subcultures often created in moments of contact leave its victims in confusion. This is a problematic situation of conflict, cultural inertia and the rejection of the culture of the indigenes in the post-

colonial state as presented in *Seat of Thorns*. The religious practices of the Kom people in the novel are continuously described as savage and pagan by the authorities of the Roman Catholic Church because of the inability of the latter to consider the positive aspects of indigenous culture.

This paper is predicated upon the idea that the enculturation of certain African religious practices in church rituals is a potent means to ameliorate upon the worship of God and develop the zeal for adherence to Christianity in the indigenes of the Cameroonian countryside. The ideal system of worship in African churches should incorporate positive aspects of African culture and the precepts of the Bible rather than denominational principles and papal dogma.

2. Statement of the Problem

The introduction of Christianity and the continuous promotion of its ideologies in pots colonial African societies where African Traditional religion had had a grip of the indigenous peoples continue to create conflicts. Writers attempt to deconstruct and construct new spaces of cultural understanding by challenging or de-centering colonial stereotypes. The African society is a crossroad of cultures and this places it in a stasis whereby forging a real identity becomes very difficult, reason why post colonial societies are inevitably hybridized. The subcultures often created in moments of contact leave its victims in confusion. This is a problematic situation of conflict, cultural inertia and the rejection of the culture of the indigenes in the post-colonial state as represented in *Seat of Thorns*. The religious practices of the Kom people in the novel are continuously described as savage and pagan by the authorities of the Roman Catholic Church because of the inability of the latter to consider the positive aspects of indigenous culture.

3. Objective of the Study

This examines the representation of conflict between western religion and African traditional practices with the aim of revealing the strategies employed by the author in order to

reconcile oppositional cultures and create spaces of intercultural understanding.

4. Research Questions

- a) Through what practices do the custodians of western religion seek to undermine the worth of African traditional practices which in turn lead to conflict?
- b) How does Ateh seek to reconcile the conflict between western religious ideologies and African traditional practices in *Seat of Thorns*?

5. Research Hypotheses

- a) The first assumption in this paper is that the outright rejection and denial to recognize the moral worth of African traditional practices in such a way as to incorporate them into the worship of God remains a breeding ground for conflict.
- b) Secondly, this paper is predicated upon the idea that the enculturation of certain African religious practices in church rituals is a potent means to ameliorate upon the worship of God and develop the zeal for adherence to Christianity in the indigenes of the Cameroonian countryside.

6. Theoretical Framework of Analysis

The theoretical framework chosen for this paper is the postcolonial theory. It refers to a set of critical perspectives in literature that grapple with the legacy of colonial rule. As a literary theory or critical approach, it deals with literature produced in countries that were once, or are now colonies of other countries. It can still be better described in the words of Elleke Boehmer (1995) as a literary analytic approach on literature about the "conditions in which colonized people seek to take their place forcibly or otherwise as historical subjects". Postcolonial theory further involves analysis of the dilemmas of developing a national identity in the wake of colonial rule, the ways in which writers from colonised countries attempt to articulate and even celebrate their cultural identities and reclaim them from the colonisers. According to John Lye (1998), postcolonial theory

“can also deal with the way literature in colonizing countries appropriates the language, images, scenes, traditions and so forth of colonized countries”. Postcolonial theory deals with literature from previously or currently colonised countries or literature which deals with colonisation, and the manner in which this literature attempts to articulate the identity of the colonised.

Bill Ashcroft et al (1995a) purport that “Postcolonial theory reflects the egregious classification of ‘first’ and ‘third’ world and contests the lingering fallacy that the postcolonial is somehow synonymous with the economically underdeveloped” (2-3). From the claim of these various critics, postcolonial theory basically ‘de-centres’ assumptions of superiority in any human society. In this paper I will use the postcolonial concepts of otherness and hybridity.

Hybridity commonly refers to “the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact one produced by colonialism” (Ashcroft et al, 1995b, 118). These critics also highlight the crossover inherent in the imperial experience is essentially a two-way process and postcolonial writing has focused on the hybridised nature of postcolonial culture as strength rather than a weakness. It is not the case of the oppressor obliterating the oppressed but it stresses the mutuality of the process. Ashcroft further argues that hybridity and the power it releases may well be seen as the further characteristic feature and contribution of the postcolonial, allowing a means of evading the replication of the binary categories of the past and developing new antimonolithic models of cultural exchange and growth (1995b: 183). This concept is used in this paper to examine how the author materialises it to create spaces of cultural understanding where colonial tendencies created conflict.

The next tenet used in this paper is ‘Otherness’. Postcolonial critic John Lye (1998) dwells on the concept of otherness. He states that the Western concept of the oriental is based as Abdul JanMohamed (1985) argues, on the Manichean Allegory which presents the world as divided into mutually excluding opposites. If the

West in ordered, rational, masculine, good, then the orient is chaotic, irrational, feminine and evil. Everything is reduced to a set of dichotomies such as black or white. This concept has relevance in this paper for in *Seat of Thorns* such binaries are seen in the perception of the African culture by the authorities of the Roman Catholic Church, and the discourses of backwardness of the African people.

7. Analyses and Discussions

This paper has two analytical parts. The first part presents Ndong’s resistance against the dogma of the Roman Catholic Church and other colonialist discourses. The effacing of these discourses is followed by an establishment of a new cultural stand. The second part shows the perspectives of the author through the hybrid situations created by Ndong.

7.1. Alterity and Resistance to Eurocentric Doctrines

Francis Ateh recounts colonialist discourses about the backwardness of African people in order to show how these perceptions still determine global inequality today. The culture of the indigenous people in this context is considered primitive, savage, uncouth, retrogressive and even evil such that they can never enhance any form of development. The dehumanisation of natives is resisted in postcolonial writing as seen in *Seat of Thorns*. Throughout the novel, the protagonist Father Ndong Peter resists the totalitarian influence of Roman Catholicism as its authorities do not consider indigenous culture in its process of establishing this foreign religion. However the pinnacle of resistance in the novel is when Ndong is interrogated by the college of Bishops and vicars in relation to his introduction of certain aspects of indigenous culture in the church.

One of the novelties Ndong brings to church is the use of the indigenous fabrics during church services. Customarily, the Roman Catholic Church has mass vestments that the priests and mass servants adorn themselves with. In his first homily in the village, Ndong reverses the dressing code for Roman Catholic Church rituals as seen in this excerpt:

Ndong, dressed in one of Baba's best dallas², moved from the inner compound preceded by four mass servers who were carrying candles and various church implements like incense and a big cross. None of them was wearing the regular mass vestments that were worn in church at Ning'an. They were all wearing hand-knitted traditional dress made in Kom, especially bought by Ndong for this event. (29)

Ndong does not consult the hierarchy of the church in Atuisong but delves into this innovation as he leans on the Bible rather than the precepts of the church. According to Ndong, church officials can be dressed in African traditional regalia so long as the spiritual state of church members is not affected adversely. Elsewhere in the novel, Ndong makes this salient remark to Father Humphrey Jones:

What is it in the vestments father? Does the solemnity of the gospel depend on what we wear when we preach? I think that it is one's dedication to the gospel that matters, not what one wears. Did Jesus wear anything special before preaching? As far as the wearing of caps by men is concerned, I must be honest with you, I realised a serious clash with our culture here. Kom notables are not supposed to be seen in the public bare-headed. [...] Does the bishop here not wear his cap in church? Where in the bible is the wearing of caps forbidden? It is after these reflections that I thought instead of insisting on things that are not biblical and losing a good number of souls, I should give up some of those rigid rules that added nothing to our faith and win more souls to God. (103)

Another moment when Ndong resists the precepts of the Roman Catholic Church in his mission to establish the church in Ning'an is when he baptises polygamists. Christianity was introduced to Africa by Europeans and Americans. Roman Catholicism was introduced by European missionaries who came alongside colonisers. Europe in essence does not have a polygamist

culture and this influenced the perception of officials on the colonised. In a situation where polygamous indigenes are to be baptised, they are first of all expected to keep only one of their wives as presented in Mongo Beti's *King Lazarus* and Kenjo Jumbam's *The White Man of God*. In these situations, characters are willing to be part of the new faith but are reluctant to put away their wives who are also the mothers of their children. They consider this inhuman. In *Seat of Thorns*, Father Ndong does not encourage the indigenes to marry many women but he does not ask polygamists to discard of their wives and keep just one. On the contrary he baptises them and asserts:

Where in the Bible in Christ's teachings does he talk about one man, one wife? In the Old Testament God's best friends like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, King David, King Solomon all had several wives but that did not stop God on having a one on one relationship with them. They remained God's special friends. Does the idea of one man and wife not come from the European culture? Why does the church stop Africans from worshiping God in their own way in their own countries? Why force the European culture on us? That is why I decided to tolerate polygamy. Especially for people who have the means of taking good care of the women they marry. (104)

In Roman Catholic tradition prayers are made through saints and in modern times pictures of these godly figures are hung on the walls of Cathedrals or other prayer arena. In most African societies, people also attain deities through intermediaries who are their ancestors. John Mbiti's (1989) posits that:

The living-dead are bilingual; they speak the language of men, with whom they lived until 'recently', and they speak the language of the spirits and of God. They are the 'spirits' with which African peoples are most concerned: it is through the living-dead that the spirit world becomes personal to men. They are still part of their human families,

²A hand-knitted and embroidered dress for elders

and people have personal memories of them. (82)

Talking about the ability of the dead to act as intermediaries between man and God, Elias Lukhaimane quotes a minister of the Zion Christian Church³ who stated that:

As the ancestors were mediators between people and God, they had to be obeyed. We should pray to the ancestors so that they should speak to God on our behalf. Ancestors are people who have died but this does not mean that they have ceased to exist. They still continue living in another world. Now they have more power than we have. They can see all things that are happening to us, because they are working very close with God. They are able to pray to God on our behalf, and the things we ask of them they present to God. They are very much concerned about us and our lives. ("The Zion Christian Church of Ignatius: An African Experiment with Christianity" 51)

This view of the role of ancestors is corroborated by the views of a character Yaya, in Kenjo Jumbam's *The White Man of God*, who claims that Africans can only relate to God through their ancestors because they are their forebears, who understand their tongue and will therefore channel their supplications, unlike the ancestors of the white people who will not understand them.

In his stand to liken their role of saints in Catholic doctrine to that of ancestors in African traditional religion, Father Ndong posts the pictures of some ancestors of the Kom people instead of those of white saints. He encourages people to pray through them and asserts when interrogated by the church authorities that:

We needed to make them understand that if they live exemplary lives, they too could

³According to Wikipedia, the Zion Christian Church (or ZCC) is the largest African initiated church operating in Southern Africa. This church fuses African traditions and values with Christian faith. As opposed to the main stream European churches, the church has sought independence and autonomy in terms of theological and dogmatic approach.

become saints. Why should we think that those who eventually get to heaven are only whites? You see, the fundamental difference between my people's beliefs and the Christian faith was just that our people believe that they must pray to God through their ancestors. If the church encourages us to pray through saints, why does it stop our people from praying through our ancestors? The saints they prayed to are distant and unknown to them. Making them understand that exemplary people in their society can also be admitted into God's kingdom convinced them more to follow the word of God. (105)

In brandishing the pictures of African ancestors on the church walls instead of those of saints, who are the ancestors of whites, Ndong debunks the idea that these saints are the sole intermediaries between man and God. Africans have always relied on their ancestors as mediums to access God because they know their ancestors and know how to relate with them.

Rivalry between Ndong and the church officials is also generated by the financial demands on the church members. In the Roman Catholic Church, special contributions are regularly made for the Pope. During these moments letters are circulated to all parishes so that adherents could donate funds in this regard. In *Seat of Thorns*, Ndong diverts these funds towards the construction of infrastructures for worship because he prioritises the latter. He proceeds by telling the bishop that:

Between you and I, your Lordship, does Rome need that money? Should Rome not send their support to these poor churches here? I have been to the Vatican and when I see the affluence there and the assets of the church, I am deeply convinced that the church does not need the contribution of poor Africans. On the contrary, the Pope should send his support to our local churches. That is why I refused to overburden my people with the contributions. (106)

Ndong's obstinacy towards the church officials is justified by his desire to use available financial resources for the development of the embryonic churches. He also claims that in defying some aspects of Canon Law, he is modifying a few aspects of church tradition. He even intimates that most of the laws of the Roman Catholic Church are incited by sheer selfishness and greed of the church authorities. He is categorical about his opinion and is unwilling to compromise his stand when he says:

I think that no human law should oblige us to go against the law that God gave us through the scriptures. When I look at the things we lay emphasis on in the church today, I do not find the basis for them in the Holy Bible. I see a doctrine based on European culture and traditions being imposed on a people who have their own strong traditions. This to me is motivated by sheer racism, and racism is condemned by God. It has been difficult for Christianity to break through fully in Africa because those who brought the good news here refused to think that there is anything good in African system of belief. They thought that all that is good in Africa are our minerals and natural forest riches, which have been stolen and recklessly exploited, even with the complicity of the church till date. The focus should be on the scriptures, not on a tradition that I believe has its own limits. (107)

From the above quotation Roman Catholicism in Africa is a doctrine that does not represent biblical precepts but it is based on European culture and traditions. He also considers the role of the church in fostering colonialism and economic exploitation in Africa as racism. According to him, the ideal church must be an adaptation of Christian faith to African tradition.

The main thematic issue represented in *Seat of Thorns* is the inability of Roman Catholic authorities to perceive positive aspects of African culture that could be incorporated into the church system. Besides certain aspects of Roman Catholicism and other aspects of European culture

are imposed unto adherents at the expense of biblical principles. This secularises the church and makes the functioning of this institution like that of ordinary worldly men. The white priests have the traits of the colonial administrator as their discourses are all aimed at enhancing Europe as the dominant power. Contrary to colonialist discourse that presents the moral purity of the whites, Francis Ateh shows how they are unreliable and untrustworthy through the words of a village notable in the novel:

But what manner of men are these Whitemen? Hardly ever keeping their word. Jam Ndang has always advised that we must use a long spoon when eating with the Whiteman. They never keep their word. Ngoh who worked in their kitchen at Atuisong always gossiped about their quarrels and stealing of our precious metals. Remember one of them who came here posing as bringer of the good word stole away our Afoakom [...]. Don't our people say the quality of a man is in his word? (112-13)

The first and last lines of this excerpt comprise questions whose answers are directly in line with the unruly behaviour of the whites who come to Kom village. These rhetorical questions when put in the social context from which this character functions erase the colonialist Manichean consideration of Westerners as civilised and Africans as backward.

The colonialist discourse of the superiority of the whites is also deconstructed by the ruler of the Kom people in the novel, otherwise referred to as the lion of Kom. The metaphor of the lion reveals his authority and majesty in the sight of his kinsmen. His word is law. Besides due to the inability of the whites to collaborate with the indigenes, he now derides any proposal for the establishment of the Roman Catholic Church in his land. When Ndong is posted out of the village by the Bishop in Atuisong because of his stance to integrate aspects of African culture into the church the lion of the tribe become furious and reacts thus:

How can a freeborn of our land be pulled by the nose by others? Bangha, go back to Ningan and tell him that I have heard about the decision of the Whiteman. That I do not want him to respect it. Can foxes order tigers around? He should not forget that he is of the ruling class in this Kingdom and nobody, not even the Whiteman, can order him around. I have spoken. (115)

Towards the end of the novel, the relationship between the Roman Catholic officials and indigenes of Kom village in the novel are stretched to elastic limits such that every endeavour of the whites is seen as a threat to the evolution of the natives. The ruler of the village believes that the approach Ndong has taken in establishing Christianity amongst his people is appropriate for it acknowledges the potency of some indigenous cultural practices. Also by referring to his people as tigers, he ascribes a sense of pride unto them for they also come from a background of men that are worthy of respect.

7.2. Creation of New Cultural Sites

Father Ndong does not solely resist the discourses and doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church but he also seeks to reconcile the culture of the Kom people with this new faith. When Ndong is posted to officiate at the Ningan parish, the villagers expect him to succeed his uncle as chief of Aboa and participate in the various rituals done by the traditional authorities of the land. Ndong is therefore on a seat of thorns as he must reconcile these oppositional cultures in order to be at ease with his conscience and ensure the growth of the church. The Roman Catholic authorities in the novel see nothing positive in the indigenous culture because it stresses ancestral worship, and this becomes the source of antagonism.

Robert Young (2001) notes that "the postcolonial world is a place of mixture" (129). Bringing together positive aspects of the indigenous culture and those of the culture of the Westerners in *Seat of Thorns* deconstructs the polarisation created in the post-independence African space presented in the novel. Referring to Bhabha's (1994) viewpoint on such mixture, John Beverly

(1999) argues "...for hybridity as a central concept in postcolonial studies, Bhabha sees hybridity as one of the effects of colonial power. It is the space in which colonial and subaltern subjects can undo the binaries imposed by the colonial subject itself" (16).

Hybridity is a reconciliation point between the binaries imposed by colonialism. The Kom community in *Seat of Thorns* is plagued by division between the church and custodians of indigenous cultures. Hybridity eradicates opposition and reconciles oppositional values and its sole interest lies in selecting the aspects that can foster development from the existing variables.

This section relies on the theories of the critic quoted above. It also looks at hybridity as a strength that unifies positive aspects of multicultural societies in order to construct a viable future. This pattern is seen in the opening pages of *Seat of Thorns* when the Bishop endorses Ndong's posting to Ningan through these words:

I am convinced you shall win more souls for Christ in your village. You understand your people and their customs very well. Preach the gospel to your people in their language, take the word even to the juju societies. Do not dismiss all your customs and traditions without exploring them and finding out what they express for your people and how they can be brought into the church or modified to serve the almighty. (2)

Ndong is appointed a priest in his own village and the expectations of the Bishop are high. Ndong will be faithful in his mission and he applies this ministerial instruction to the letter. Shortly after arriving Ningan, Ndong tells his grandfather that "...it seems to me that the white men who came here confused this culture with the word of God. I intend to correct some of these things" (21).

From this premise there are a series of cross-cultural encounters whereby the church dogma is being ignored to the benefit of a new system of worship that accepts the customs of the indigenes. Besides, Ndong's first encounter with the Fon (Paramount head of the Kom people) shows his

cultural duality. Just as constituted rituals that connect the faithfuls to their God, there are also customary acts that link the living with God in the African cosmos. Ndong reminds his grandfather that "I was at Laikom yesterday and told the Fon that I shall sacrifice to our ancestors" (21). This will be for a post-funeral ceremony or "death celebration" which will precede the coronation of Ndong as the chief of Aboa village. Hybridity is concretised in this moment when ceremonies, which in the past or as expected by the white man's faith would not hold in the same space, or at the same moment are merged together for the accomplishment of a unique purpose. Ndong

...decided together with the organising committee of the event to prepare just one ceremony beginning with the holy mass and ending with his coronation and death celebration. The Fon and all those who wanted to be baptised would receive that sacrament during the first part of the event and the festivities that follow would end with his enthronement." (25)

This is an indication that a new cultural paradigm is established in this space contrary to the past when the church and the native customs were practiced separately. It is in this hybrid ceremony that many are baptised to become adherents of the Christian faith.

Bill Aschroft et al. (1995b) write that hybridity creates new transcultural forms in the contact zone produced by colonialism (118). They also highlight the idea that it is a matter of mixture whereby no entity dominates the other but differences are reconciled through the creation of newness. In *Seat of Thorns* this is translated through the songs that are now sang in the indigenous tongue in church as the author writes: "Songs that the different choral groups sang in church in those days were usually either in the English language or Latin" but they have been translated because many choir members were either illiterate, did not understand the message of the songs or even did not pronounce the wordings well (28). The songs are accompanied by the

'chong'⁴ instrumentation and the author tell us that "...this is the first time the chong was played in the church in Kom" (28). The author continues to assert that:

The "Lord have Mercy" and "Gloria" were sung by the choir in Kom language using the tune of the popular njangKwein⁵ in Kom. The songs again sounded so new and so enticing that all the congregation joined in and swayed from one side to the other, to the rhythm of the beautiful drumming that accompanied the singing. [Shortly afterwards], the Atinge, the beautiful palace juju was heard from the outside. The juju danced followed by the instrumentalists [and] by one notable who was carrying the holy Bible in a raffia bag. He danced to the altar and handed the Bible to the priest. (30)

This marks a turning point in the church in Ningan and the entire Kom land. The church has fully embraced the indigenous tradition and this henceforth will constitute an integral part of the people's lives. The translation of popular Latin songs into Kom language, the use of njangKwein, the display by the juju, the use of a raffia bag to carry the Bible to the altar show the cultural blend established in the Kom community.

Ndong's establishment of this biculturalism and his optimism in the perennality of the latter is summed up by his words during the sermon which he styles "good news" (30). This good news is not mainly on the biblical promises for mankind but the significant aspect of his homily on this particular occasion is to praise and endorse the new cultural trend that the church has adopted. He goes thus:

Today is a very special day in our Kingdom. It is a day that marks the inextricable marriage between our culture and the church. [...] From today, there will be no reason for us to take our dead to church and then return home to perform any rituals before burial. These rituals will be integrated into our

⁴ An indigenous dance

⁵ A dance from the home of a Kom notable called Kwein

church service for all of them serve the same purpose; that of facilitating our passage into the next world. We shall consecrate palm wine to change it into Christ's blood. [...] So I pray that we see the church as one with our culture, as the best way to God. (32)

The incorporation of the African rites of passage to church ceremonies and the use of consecrated palm wine as the blood of Christ are some of the aspects that mark the marriage between the people's culture and the church. The enculturation of a local drink into church rituals shows how indigenous food culture is given value in a context where it has hitherto been described as an element used for pagan worship. The author informs us that "all who drank the [consecrated] wine had the feeling that it tasted better than the one they drank in their homes everyday" (34). In many Cameroon villages, palm wine is not just a past time but it is used in all encounters because of its spiritual significance. Cameroonians like other Africans are very spiritual and nothing is done or discussed (either casual or ceremonial) without palm wine being consumed by the living and by the living-dead. The latter are made to consume it through the pouring of this liquor on the ground. Djockoua Manyaka Toko in her *Cross-cultural Affinities* stresses the importance of palm wine in the Cameroonian setting: "Before any first alcoholic drink is offered to the invitees during an important traditional ceremony, the first drops of the liquor are poured on the ground, a sign of interconnectedness between the land, the living-dead and the living" (97).

The use of palm wine to mark the interconnectedness between the living and the living-dead is also symbolised in Christianity through the blood of Jesus that gives access to God. Just like imported wines, consecrated palm wine still serves the purpose and it is to the acclaim of the indigenes "Since Ndong introduced that innovation, this has become the most cherished part of the service and everybody comes to church with his personal cup. They would not miss the church palm wine for they said it tasted sweeter than any other wine in the kingdom after the blessing of the priest." (97). It is not therefore the

ordinary palm wine they consume everyday but its savour becomes special when it is blessed by the priest so that it would symbolise the blood of Jesus. This hybrid moment creates harmony in the arena of worship.

Another moment of hybridity brings exponential growth in food production in Kom is when Ndong and the Fon associate for the ritual ceremony before the planting season. Customarily, sacrifices are made by the authorities of the Kom people in order to seek the blessing of God for a mighty harvest. Ndong who is a notable is invited to participate in the ritual. Ndong "went on his knees and with his hands raised in supplication prayed God for a rich harvest and many more births" (49). Once he stopped, the Fon "took the floor and called on the gods of the land and the ancestors to accept the sacrifice and bring prosperity to the land" (50). This moment of prayer and sacrifices unto the gods brought wonderful results as presented by the author "the harvest in Kom that year was the richest as far as their memories could take them. The Fon was convinced that Ndong's participation at the Koh Ngang sacrifice⁶ was responsible for it. This reinforced his faith in God." This excerpt presents hybridity as strength for it assembles binary powers for cultural exchange and growth.

As presented above, biculturalism creates a composite culture that induces harmony, material prosperity and a reinforcement of the indigenes' faith in God. In the ensuing tension in the novel, these two cultures must be fused in order to attain a subculture that incorporates realities of indigenous society to the Western religious practices.

8. Conclusion

This paper set out to examine and deconstruct euro-centric codes as represented in *Seat of Thorns*. The analyses show that acculturation is ideal in reconciling oppositional cultural viewpoints for contemporary Africa. The Indigenous Church of God created at the end of the novel is a prototype of the ideal church today for it

⁶A special sacrificial ceremony to appease the gods and ask for their favour

embraces positive aspects of the African religious system, local colouring like indigenous dresses, songs, dances, instruments and palm wine in church rituals. The enculturation of the local customs in church activities makes the church lively, indigenises the ceremonies and makes African adherents more involved and submerged in the process. This indigenisation of activities and rituals pull them closer to God because they are in touch with their local realities in the course of worship. The deliciousness of consecrated palm wine is a result of hybridity. Besides, the enormous harvest that accrues from a combination of the priest's prayers and the sacrifices unto ancestors before the planting season are eloquent testimonies of the strength of hybridity.

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