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## The Quest for the Survival of African Culture and Tradition: A Structuralist Reading of Ayi Kwei Armah's Fragments

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Using reader-response literary criticism and structuralism, this paper has evaluated and examined the necessity of preserving and revitalising African culture and tradition. It has also shown the intrinsic relation between the ancestors and the living people as featured by Ayi Kwei Armah in Fragments. Ancestors are revered and worshipped because of their importance in the lives of African people. Ancestors protect people who are still living and they also punish people who disobey the norms of society. The study revealed that western culture and the excessive love of materialism threaten African culture and prevent it from thriving socio-culturally. African people should undertake serious actions which will contribute to the rebirth and the restoration of African tradition. The contact between Africa and the West has negatively influenced the leadership of Africa. Corruption and bad governance have been embraced and introduced into the system of governance by new African leaders who took over. Nepotism, theft, bribery, and their likes have become cherished values in post-colonial Africa. The study recommends that African people should go back to their sources in order to build a solid foundation in Africa.

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## INTRODUCTION

The struggle for the survival of African tradition and cultural values continued to receive significant attention from many African scholars over the years. The preservation of African tradition and cultural values in this era of globalisation has been the focus of many African writers who have emphasised the necessity of preserving and redeeming this culture threatened by Western culture. Scholars like Koffi Noël Brindou, Molefi Kete Asante, Frantz Fanon and Labo Bouche Abdou have highlighted in their respective works the necessity of preserving African tradition and the revitalisation of African culture. Ayi Kwei Armah, a Ghanaian writer of the second generation has also made use of his novels to revive the traditional culture threatened by Western cultural hegemony. For Ayi Kwei Armah, traditional values are the real foundation to stand on for the Africans' development. In the view of Brindou (2021), "The Ghanaian novelist advocates the African child's education into the traditional culture as the solution for the African child's psychological and socially sustainable developments" (45). He also lays emphasis on the core role of ancestors in the daily life of African people. He skillfully develops the impact of money and colonisation on the Ashanti community. Abdou (2015) contends that "Armah shows how corruption and nepotism, which overwhelm the Ghanaian society, are offshoots of materialism, which banes people with insufficient time to spend on their ancestral rites" (1). It is to restore this situation that this work is framed as follows "The Quest for the Survival of African Culture and Tradition: A Structuralist Reading of Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments*". The purpose of this paper is to show the place and the core role of ancestors in everyday life of African people and how it is important to rely on these ancestors. The paper also seeks to show how the excessive love of materialism and Western culture threatens traditional African culture and tradition. Finally, the

paper shows the necessity of the restoration and the rebirth of African tradition in this globalised world. Reader-response theory and structuralism are the two literary theories used to analyse this study. Reader-response criticism in this work is the creation of literary meaning as individual readers' responses to the text under consideration, based on their culture, tradition, life experience, and history. It is a type of theory in which the readers' feedback or reaction to the text is vital to the interpretation of this text. Structuralism is a modern intellectual movement that analyses cultural phenomena according to principles derived from linguistics, emphasising the systematic interrelationships among the elements of human activity and thus the abstract codes and conventions governing the social production of meanings. For a better understanding of this work, this paper is divided into three sections: the first section discusses the importance of ancestors as seen through *Fragments*. The second section deals with the excessive love of materialism and the impact of Western culture on traditional African cultural values, and the last section is about the necessity of the restoration and the revitalisation of African culture and tradition.

### The Importance of Ancestors as Seen Through Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments*

Africans are a category of people whose ancestors are ever present in their consciousness and for this reason, these ancestors are always honoured through various means. The honour and the respect Africans have towards their ancestors are due to the capacity of the ancestors to preserve and protect people who are still living in this earthly world. Kwame Gyekye, a Ghanaian critic and philosopher has largely elaborated on this issue of ancestorship. According to Gyekye (1996), "the ancestors are certain individuals of the past generation of a lineage who are said to have distinguished themselves in many ways and in particular, to have led virtuous and exemplary lives worthy of

emulation by succeeding generations” (164). From this, it is clear that ancestors play a paramount role in African society thanks to their capacity for protection.

For most Africans, ancestors should be praised and worshipped because of their virtue of the spirit. Africans have always sought to revere their ancestors to ensure favourable treatment from them since they are spirits. Even though the ancestors are dead, they are, nevertheless, believed to be dwelling in a world of spirit, from where they constantly communicate with the world of human beings. This idea is well illustrated in Armah’s fictional world through Naana’s words, a character from the novel: “I am confessing to you now. Be kind to me: a die again and enter this world, those here above think so real, this world which you know is only the passing flesh of everything that hosts, the soul of our people” (200). From these words, Naana, the grandmother of Baako, the central character, is expressing her readiness to enter that world of spirit.

For Naana, the physical death on this earth leads her soul to be born in the world of spirits, that is, the world of ancestors. Since Naana symbolises the traditional African cultural values, the author Ayi Kwei Armah implicitly informs his readers that in Africa, the ancestors are believed to live in another world, that of spirits. Ayi Kwei Armah attaches much importance to African culture. Gyekye (1996) in the same vein, maintains, “Given that culture constitutes the conceptual, social, and normative framework for the fulfilment of the individual person that values are of the utmost importance for both the moral and spiritual guidance and elevation of the individual, and the stability and smooth running of the human society” (139). Thus, in traditional Africa, the ancestors are valued, and they occupy an important place in African people’s daily life. As a promoter of African cultural values, Naana’s reactions and deeds in this novel implicitly invite each African to believe in the ancestors for the role they play in our lives. Professor Kwame Gyekye sees it in the same way; he says:

*The ancestors are believed to be interested in the welfare of their descendants and ever willingly and ready to help them and treat them favourably. In this connection, they are also believed to take a keen interest in the moral*

*conduct of human society and to serve as custodians of the traditional moral order, having helped to create that order themselves (164).*

From the above quotation, it is clear that in Africa, ancestors are believed to guide their descendants. In *Fragments*, Armah articulates this through one of his characters. According to Naana, in order to allow Baako, the protagonist to go to America and come back safely, the ancestors should be well satisfied. This idea is clarified during the ceremony, performed on the occasion of Baako’s departure to America. Foli, the uncle of Baako was appointed to perform this ceremony of libation since he is the uncle of Baako. He performed the ceremony wrongly. Instead of pouring all the drink into the glass, Foli poured a little drink in order to drink the remaining drink. This is well illustrated in the following words:

*The Pig Foli, in spite of the beauty of the words he had spoken, remained inside his soul a lying. A shameful lot more than a whole half bottle of the drink had remained in poured, and now he went and took from among his shiny things a glass to pour the traveler’s drink of ceremony for Baako. It was a very small glass he took, he shrivelled soul, and the better to keep what remained of the drink for his own parched throat (6-7).*

Since it is the belief of the African people that their ancestors have the power to punish those of their earthly kinsmen who break the traditionally sanctioned code or fail to fulfil their moral obligations to their relatives while rewarding those who conform their lives to the traditional code, Naana sees it as an obligation to perform the libation herself. For her, if things were well done, the circle would never break. Then, the hands of the ancestors will be over Baako and surely, he would come back safely. This is more enlightened in the following words expressed by Naana on that occasion:

*Quietly I went past him into the doorway where he had stood offering libation to those gone before, and in the same place where he had let those miserly drops. I poured down everything in the glass, and it was only that I opened my mouth again Naananom, drink to your thirst, and go with the young one. Protect him well, and bring him back, to us, to you (8).*

In this novel, Naana stands for the promoter of African cultural values; therefore, every word she pronounces is worth taking into account. The author by putting her at the beginning of the novel as the title of the first chapter surely has a hidden message. The message Armah would like his readers to have is that in Africa old people play a core role as far as tradition is concerned. Since in Africa, people believe in the immortality of the soul after death, many maxims or proverbs are made up in order to allow people to remember this issue in their daily life.

In African tradition, the soul is an immortal part of the human being that survives death and that humans, in an afterlife, will give an account to God for their lives in this world. The belief that the soul of a person survives bodily death is expressed in the Akan maxim: “When a person dies, he is not really dead” (Gyekye, 1996, p.65). This simply means that there is something in a human being that continues to exist in another world called “The world of spirits”. Another Akan artistic symbol, assuming the immortality of God, expresses the thought, “could God die, I will I also die” (66). God is immortal, a Man who is created in God’s image, in God’s likeness is also immortal in the view of Ayi Kwei Armah because a Man whose soul, conceived as an in-dwelling spark of God, will not die either. In other words, the eternity of God implies the immortality of the human soul which is a part of the divine essence. Indeed, the reality of the world of spirits, inhabited by those who have departed this life, is based upon assumptions about the immortality of the human soul and personal survival in an afterlife. This belief in the survival of the soul after bodily death justifies, Naana’s readiness to leave this world to go to the world of spirit, where there would be no blindness. In the following line, Naana has it: “My spirit is straining for another beginning in a place where will be new eyes and where the farewells that will remain unsaid here will turn to a glad welcome and my ghost will find the beginning that will be known here as my end” (196). From this excerpt, it is clear that in traditional African society, the death of a person does not signify the end of that person, but the continuity of that person in another world, that of “spirit”. The immortality of a person after his bodily death justifies the reason for which African people rely on their ancestors. This idea of the continuity of life

after bodily death is not only dealt with by Armah but also some scholars highlighted this issue in their various works.

Ancestors become spirits since they have left this bodily world and are referred to as the full phrase Nananom. Nsamanfo (grandfathers or great-grandfathers or grandmothers who have become spirits or ghosts). In this second novel of Ayi Kwei Armah, the name Nananom has been used several times due to the importance it avails in African society. Baako’s blind grandmother used this name when performing the libation on the occasion of Baako’s departure to America. Foli, the uncle of Baako, when making the prayer on Baako’s departure to the United States of America also uttered this name as an illustration, Foli says:

*Where you are going*

*Go softly*

*Nanamon,*

*You who have gone before,*

*See that his body does not lead him (3-4)*

### **The Excessive Love of Materialism and the Impact of Western Culture on Traditional African Cultural Values**

According to *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 7<sup>th</sup> edition*, “Materialism is the belief that money, possessions and physical comforts are more important than spiritual values”. From this definition, it is clear that some characters in this novel have been influenced by this wing of materialism. Armah in his fictional work presents and depicts the actions, the reactions of some characters that show the level at which material immorality exists in contemporary Ghana. The craftsmanship of this novelist of the second generation of African writers discloses that the fictional Ghana depicted in this novel has something to do with actual Ghana. Material immorality has various shapes in this novel, but this work will deal with three forms of this material immorality.

The first form of material immorality is observed in the life of Akosua Russell. According to the narrator, we are informed that at the production



meeting attended by some artists and some Americans who sponsor art with foundation money she did it in such a way to gain money from this occasion. Akosua arranges these so-called *soirées* to get money for her own use. Though she is not a writer, she makes it in a way that she will take the work of others and read it as if she were the author. The following passage enlightens more about the character of Akosua Russell.

*I know you'll find some booze tonight, all right, if that is what you want. But as for art, that woman arranges these so-called soirées for only one thing; to get American money for her own use. Go ahead. Bring all your work and read it here. She will tell the visiting Americans it was she who taught you to write. Or if that is too much, she will say she encouraged you, inspired you, anything, and she will get more money to continue the good work. She has some sweet poison, that woman (111).*

From the above quotation, it is clear that Akosua is a fake character who can be assimilated into post-colonial African leaders who are able to amass material means at all costs for their own satisfaction. Snatching the work of another person and presenting it as if it were our own work goes against ethics. This behaviour of Akosua goes in line with that of nowadays African leaders who are capable of using the wealth of their population for their personal and egoistic needs. The writer portrayed this in his fictional world so as to raise readers' awareness of how people are able to falsify the works of their counterparts for their own use.

Furthermore, Ayi Kwei Armah would like to rouse our awareness of how people can cheat others by using their work without any permission. Though it is a fictional work, this issue has become evil in African society today. It is some of the pathologies which prevent the African continent from thriving economically. It has become a social concern that should be eradicated from human society. Akosua can be considered an irresponsible woman and I think this fictional woman epitomises most African leaders in this contemporary Africa.

Another form of material immorality is seen through some characters in the novel. These characters are Efua, Araba and Baako. It is worth saying that Efua is Araba's mother. Because of

these characters' attitudes, the traditional ceremonies such as Baako's baby nephew's outdoor ceremony, have lost their spiritual significance and become an opportunity for ostentation and avarice. The intention of these characters was just to make money on occasion. With regard to these characters already mentioned, we notice that their aim of performing Araba's baby's outdoor ceremony was just to make money. In traditional Africa, the purpose of such a ceremony is to allow the ancestors to protect the baby, but Efua, Araba and Baako and even Kwei see it as an opportunity to make money. The following passage will enlighten the attitude of these characters:

*Efua took the calendar, got momentarily lost in admiring contemplation of the picture, and then turned her gaze down to the calendar itself.*

*"September twenty-eighty", Baako said*

*"The month is almost dead", Efua said, Wednesday*

*"This is such a bad time. But we'll have to think Seriously about the outdoor ceremony.*

*"I thought there were fixed times for those things".*

*an outdoor ceremony held more than or few days after payday, o useless, Efua said.*

*"For Senior Officers, September 26", Baako intoned making no attempt to purge the Sarcasm from his voice", for junior Officers, September 29; for laborers, October 3. I read it on our official board at work" The sarcasm was left drip harmlessly away.*

*"The eighth day after his homecoming would... the fourth", Araba said.*

*"No, Baako answered, affecting an infant voice. "Thirty days hath September...."*

*"So would it be the fifth? "*

*"Yes"*

*“Why are you struggling so with the calendar?” Baako asked.*

*“Are you so pressed you have to make money out of the child?” (88).*

With regard to the above dialogue, it is very clear that Efua and Araba’s intention in performing this ceremony is to make money out of the baby. Their refusal to answer Baako’s questions shows the extent to which they are conscious of whatever they are doing. Baako, the appointed Master of Ceremony (MC) wanted to know if there were no specific times for such a ceremony but Efua and Araba refused to provide answers to his questions. The following passage clearly describes this attitude: “I thought there were fixed times for those things”, Baako said, “like a week or a month or whatever it is after birth? Neither mother nor sister seemed to have been listening” (88). This attitude of Efua and her daughter Araba shows how they are engaged in making money on the occasion of the outdoor ceremony. This insane attitude will no doubt breed some consequences worth discussing. This is a result of the excessive love of materialism in Ghana after its independence. This excessive love of materialism becomes a plague gnawing African society in general and Ghanaian society in particular. It is out of this excessive love that Efua and Araba are seeking the appropriate time that can allow them to gain money during their so-called outdoor ceremony. Normally, the outdoor ceremony is the occasion when the newly born infant is given a name and identity, and it usually occurs eighteen days after the baby’s birth. It is usually a solemn occasion that calls for the observance of tradition. In the episode recorded in the novel, however, tradition is completely ignored since the main aim of the principal actors in the drama is to commercialise the ceremony. This explains why the occasion is fixed close to payday and Naana who should have been the obvious consultant has been ignored.

To illustrate this, let us have a look at the same ceremony performed in Marita Golden’s *Migration of the Heart*. This ceremony took place in Nigeria. This naming ceremony took place on the occasion of Tope and Nike’s twins’ birth, characters of the book by Dadja-tiou (2010):

*The naming ceremony was held a week after babie’s birth. Tope’s a partement was bursting with people, most dressed in formal Nigerian attire. I’d cornrowed my hair, and one of the women had made a Yourba-style dress for me. Paper plates heaped with jollof rice, hot, peppery stew and beam-cakes. Littered the room. I stood in a corner next to Femi. He held me tightly around the waist, gratified and pleased by my dress, my hair. I had begun to understand the Yoruba that rushed around me in a torrent, had pecked up a few words and used them whenever I could. The ceremony began with one of the older men acting as priest, standing to address those gathered. He poured a libation, a sprinkling of gin into the carpet to have ancestors still living in spirit (115).*

The above passage is well illustrative and helps understand the wrong side of the ceremony performed by Efua and Araba. From the above passage, we are informed that the naming ceremony took place a week after the babies’ birth according to the norms of their milieu. This contrasts with what Efua and Araba did. Araba and Efua have sought the appropriate period close to payday so that the guests could donate a lot of money. Another important element to be mentioned is that the ceremony was held by one of the older men who acted as a priest. In the case of Araba, Naana who should have been considered the older one, was neglected and rejected. All this shows how tradition has been neglected and violated on the occasion of Araba’s baby’s outdoor ceremony.

Indeed, Naana’s effort to get Baako to save the child was fruitless since Baako, who is conscious of the change that society has undergone, knows that his mother, his sister, and his brother-in-law will not listen to him. The ceremony itself is one big show in which the newly born infant is exposed to the strong current from a new electric form and Efua and other petty-minded women who are attracted by the present-day materialism not only call for donations but also develop a keen interest in counting them. Efua, for example, has no qualms in saying: “the donation goes in the brass pan” (Okleme, 2004, p. 269).

### The Greediness as the Cause of the non-Respect of Tradition in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments*

Another form of material immorality is observed in the behaviour of Foli, Baako's uncle. The material immorality as observed is nothing but greediness. On the occasion of Baako's departure to America, some ceremony known as libation was performed; the novel states clearly that it is Foli, the uncle of Baako, who held this ceremony. In Akan's custom, an uncle's relationship with his maternal nephew is determined in a unique way. By tradition, a man who is spirit may not bestow to others the properties of the flesh. There is no physical relationship between a father and his own child, the physical bond being supplied by the mother. Thus, an uncle, who has sprung from the same womb as his sister, the mother, has a stronger kinship with her child than her own husband. Then, in all matters reflecting on the wellbeing of the nephew, in the outdoor ceremony, Baako bears more responsibility than Kwesi, the father of Araba's baby. But in the case of Baako's departure ceremony, Foli bears more responsibility than Baako's biological father, whose name the author kept silent. This explains why Foli and Baako are chosen to preside over all these ceremonies. As far as material immorality I have been talking about is concerned, Foli's attitude during Baako's departure ceremony justifies its existence. Labo Bouche Abdou in his article highlighting this same issue, reckons that "Foli's greed for a drink will break the welded circle existing for years between the world of the livings and that of the dead. His drunken gluttony then contributes to the subversion of the relationship between the ancestors and their offspring" (Abdou, 2015, p. 176). From this quotation, it is amply clear that Abdou condemns and scolds this negative attitude of Foli, who can be said to be influenced by western civilisation.

During such rites, tradition should be respected in order to allow the ancestors to take care of the one for whom the ceremony is performed. But for uncle Foli, it is an occasion to make a profit, to satisfy his thirst. The following quotation clearly shows Foli's intention to pour a little of the drink in order to drink the remaining drink.

*The pig Foli, in spite of the beauty of the words he had spoken, remains inside his soul a lying*

*pig. A shameful lot more than a whole half bottle of the drink had remained unpoured, and now he went and took from among his many shiny things a glass to pour traveler's drink of ceremony for Baako. It was a very small glass he took, the shrivelled soul, the better to keep what remained of the drink for his own parched throat (6-7)*

From the above quotation, one can infer that Foli poured a little drink so as to drink after the remaining drink. From this, it is clear that Armah lets his readers know that in contemporary Ghana, people do not respect tradition.

Another material immorality is seen through the behaviour displayed by the Junior Assistant to the Secretary of the Civil Service Commission and the Principal Secretary. But at this level, this material immorality has a new dimension, that of bribery. When Baako was looking for a job at the civil service commission, the people in charge attempted to bribe him. Baako puts his application there and whenever he goes, they just tell him to go and come tomorrow. The following passage by Armah sheds more light on this issue:

*"You want me to help you?" I am not asking you for help. I filled the form. Ah, weell" the junior assistant rose, shrugging. You understand me. You can come and see me when you decide you want me to help you. And don't come here just to waste my time. I'm a busy now. I have my post". He left the office. Minutes went by and he had not come back. It was when Baako walked out into the sun and the dust of the official car park outside that he saw the junior assistant to the secretary of the civil service commission standing in the shade of a nim tree, smoking and chatting contentedly with one of his colleagues (78).*

From the above passage, it is clear that the junior secretary wanted to bribe Baako. One can wonder what kind of help he wanted Baako to ask him. This is the attitude of those who are engaged in this evil. Furthermore, while he says that he does not have time and he is a busy man, he left his office, went smoking and chatted contently with his colleagues. This attitude Baako witnessed confirms what Brempong told him on the plane while they were coming back home. Brempong warned him that in Ghana, to find a job does not require what you know

but who you know. Had not been for his old friend Ocran's help, Baako would not have found a job. One can infer that it is one of the author's social concerns that Armah would like to denounce through this novel. This insane altitude does not only exist in fictional Ghana but also exists in other African countries. I think this is the image of most African nations after their independence. Ayi Kwei Armah artistically depicts African post-colonial societies in which corruption, impunity, bad governance, nepotism extolling mediocrity at the detriment of meritocracy, embezzlement and misappropriation of public funds have become a flagrant show of shame without an iota of inhibition. To clearly see how immorality is rooted in Ngugi's fictional Kenya which I think is the image of all African countries, post-independence, let us analyse the behaviour and the use of the language of the following character. According to the narrative, Mwaura, for the sake of money, is ready to undertake whatever job he sees, even the vilest that can provide much money. The following passage by Dadja-tiou (2010) sheds light on what I have been saying:

*Mwaura was one of those who worshipped at the shrine of the god of money. He used to say that there was no universe he would not visit, no river that he would not cross, no mountain that he would not climb, and no crime that he would not commit in loyal obedience to the molten god of money (54).*

The above extract stands as a proof of Mwaura's love for money and from this, immorality exists at each level. This attitude of Mwaura is similar to that of Akosua and to that of the junior assistant to the secretary of the civil service commission. To conclude, one can say that in post-independence Ghana, material immorality takes different shapes.

## CONCLUSION

This study on Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments* has examined and evaluated the core role of ancestors in everyday life of African people and how it is important to rely on these ancestors. It has shown that ancestors in the African context play an important role. Ancestors are immortal and can protect those who are still living on this earth. The study has also revealed that there is a link between

the ancestors and those who are still living. Not everybody can be called an ancestor after his death but ancestors are a category of people who lived a righteous life before dying. After bodily death, ancestors become spirits and since God is a spirit, there is a permanent link between God and the ancestors. They can therefore protect and secure those on earth who live according to the norms of the tradition. Furthermore, the study revealed that western culture and the excessive love of materialism threaten African culture and prevent it from thriving socio-culturally. Therefore, it urges African people to undertake serious actions which will contribute to the rebirth and the restoration of traditional African values and the pledge of sustainable development of Africa.

The use of Reader-Response criticism and structuralism has helped in the analysis of Armah's *Fragments*, in which the writer promotes the recourse to the traditional African practices. Thanks to these two theories, it has been clear that in Africa, the respect of the old people is of paramount importance in the survival of traditional African values. Colonisation and its corollary effects impede African culture and tradition from contributing to the development of African people. The greediness and the desire to amass the country's richness at all costs push many Africans to question traditional practices. The study, therefore, recommends that African people should go back to their source in order to build a solid foundation of Africa. The ancient tradition is the real foundation for the development of Africa. Finally, the study discloses that to have sustainable psychological and social cohesion, African people need to make recourse to the ancient tradition (Brindou, 2021)

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