

Narrative Realism at the Interplay of Traditionality and Modernity in Ousmane Sembene's *God's Bits of Woods* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*

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ABSTRACT

This paper articulates the interactions between a traditional and modern world as embodied by the colonizer and the colonized, focusing on Ousmane Sembène's *God's Bits of Woods* (1960) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* (1965). It argues that both narratives can be read as realist novels that counter the hegemonic power of the European empire. While Sembène engages in critiquing imperialism and its social and cultural effects in the West African community – Senegal, Mali and Niger – Ngugi concentrates on the internal problems of the Gikuyu as they respond to the contact with the Western culture. The essay claims that the sociopolitical agendas in these novels should be understood within the context of French and British colonial regimes concerned with finding a legitimizing basis and control in an era when social and political forces of the colonies were energetically asserting themselves.

INTRODUCTION

God's Bits of Woods and *The River Between* should be read, I argue, as realist novels. *Realism*, according to *The dictionary of Literary Terms and Definitions* is "a production that refers generally to any artistic or literary portrayal of life in a faithful, accurate manner, unclouded by false ideals, literary conventions, or misplaced aesthetic glorification and beautification of the world. It is a theory or tendency in writing to depict events in human life in a matter-of-fact, straightforward manner". Furthermore, to paraphrase Ian Watt, *Realism* is the defining feature of the novel. Thus, instead of being looked at as idealized works, *God's Bits of Woods* and *The River Between* should be read as national narratives that depict realistically (post)colonial conditions. Watt discusses *realism* in *The Rise of the Novel* and to him, the realist novel does not follow conventional plots as seen with works of all previous genres. This underpins the idea that "the narrative methods whereby the novel embodies this circumstantial view of life may be called its ... realism" (Watt 32). Along with social and/or racial injustice, these novels depict life conditions and culture clashes through traditionality and modernity focusing on factual pictures of life struggles in literature. I further draw upon this form of realism as the study

goes on. Along with the changing of the plot, characters in the works under consideration are unique as well as situations within the plots. This shift in narrative descriptions theorizes the new trend that postcolonial literature has taken.

We define Postcolonial literature as a mode of reading and writing for writers of developing nations to address national issues and/or write back to the center. This paper focuses on this definition to explore critical themes in both narratives. I contend that most scholarship written on *Gods Bits of Wood* either deals with the "strike" or relates to class struggles". In doing so, some elements that need attention in the novel may not be covered. Likewise, several studies on *The River Between* analyze the story through a general postcolonial reading looking at several themes together. The underlined meaning of colonialism in a general sense seems to be more present in writings on these novels. Rather than employing a holistic approach, this paper utilizes a comparative approach to address specific topics that have been neglected in research.

While *The River Between* presents the internal hitches of the Gikuyu as they encounter the Western culture (Nwankwo 48), *Gods Bits of Wood* focuses on both national cultures and resistance. Ngugi's novel is concerned with the

Gikuyu people of Kenya and with the coming of Christianity and the exploitation of the country. Characters come to realize that the Christian faith may be meaningful for the Gikuyu. But the narrator knows that it can be so, only as it grows out of their own life situation, and not as it is imposed upon them as a law. Sembène's narrative rails against imperialism in Senegal, Mali and Niger, some regions that I will refer to as West Africa.

Before colonization, Africans were rooted in their own traditions. Solidarity, mutual respect, and loyalty to customs and cultures were incredibly anchored in individuals. But with the aftermath of colonization, we are forced to analyze the interaction between African traditions and European cultures which exemplifies modernity in both narratives. This paper begins with a general overview of both narratives to continue with a critical reading of the concept of nationalism and the West African and Kenyan experiences of the French and British imperialisms. Most analysis draws upon the reading of religion as an allegory of social division and the resistance of the African traditional heritage to external forces.

REALISM SETTINGS: AN OVERVIEW

I begin by offering an overview of both novels including nationalism that underlies the authors' accounts. The important features that bring the authors' novels together are their settings and foci. Not only are they set in postcolonial nations but also they grapple with themes intrinsic to (de)colonization. These settings and foci create as yet other elements that substantiate the argument that these works should be read as realist novels.

Sembène's *God's Bits of Woods* came out during the independence of Senegal in 1960. Sembène represents the relationships between France and West Africa as based on oppressor and oppressed. The plot is centered on the strike on the Dakar-Niger train workers. The colonial process of controlling and exploiting the "natives" meets resistance with the youth. The West African community rails against the European imperialism making a demand for a reconsideration of their social and economic conditions. Some community members distance themselves from the French culture. The deceptive opposition between Ad' djibid'ji and her grandmother exemplifies the theme of culture clashes: Western culture and local cultures.

The older generation that embodies West African traditions appears to be reluctant to support the youth that struggles for economic welfare. In his article, "'Our Strike': Equality, Anticolonial Politics and the 1947-48 Railway Strike in French West Africa", Frederick Cooper reinterprets the context of the strike and its historical and economic scope which allows a bigger picture of the setting of the novel. He argues that "the strike must be understood in the context of a French government anxious to find a new basis of legitimacy and control in an era when social and political movements in the colonies were asserting themselves with new vigor" (83). While Sembène's socio-political novel addresses imperialism and its sociocultural effects in West Africa, Ngugi's criticizes the Europeans' rule and its aftermath in Kenya.

The River Between is set in the 1920s and 1930s in the Gikuyu community in Kenya. It narrates the story of two villages, Kameno and Makuyu in the region as people struggle over individual faith and ways of life. The polytheistic followers of Kameno preserve their rites and rituals against Christian missionaries settled in Siriana, Makuyu, threatening the Gikuyu traditions. Broadly speaking, "Kameno [...] strives to retain its traditional beliefs. Makuyu, on the other hand, embraces Christianity and establishes definite links with the white mission at Siriana" (Rice 12). The narrator exposes the ways in which the Gikuyu's interests are pitted against the British will. He unmasks local individuals who support the process of Christianization. For example, Joshua and Kabonyi are the first people to live their old practices behind. However, the latter decided later to leave the mission, including its religion and schooling system.

Manifestly, Joshua and the other converted are part of those who facilitate the missionaries' undertakings. Chege, like other characters, challenges the imperial machine "but did not see it as a contradiction that he, the embodiment of the true Gikuyu, should have sent his son to the very missionary center whose existence he had always opposed" (Nwankwo 35). Of course, these settings generate a whole tension in the ridges. By sending his son to school, Waiyaki's father reminds us of Ezeulu in *Achebe's Arrow of God* (1964) – the novel centers around Ezeulu, the chief priest of several Nigerian villages, who confronts colonial powers and Christian missionaries in the 1920s. The dissection of the African communities is a theme that is pervasive in early Postcolonial literatures by African authors.

While Ngugi's narrative alludes to the West, it candidly addresses Kenyans' conditions in general. However, the author avoids depicting his people as the exploited, manipulated, and subjugated dupes of the Europeans. Instead, he leaves the reader in no doubt, as does Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, that "the tribe contains the seeds of its own downfall" (Rice 12). In *The River Between*, by strengthening the educational institutions within the Gikuyu tribe, Waiyaki hopes to strengthen the nationalist ties between Makuyu and Kameno in an effort to resist imperialism maneuvers. One can read in his action the translation of an authorial voice whose desire is to reunite the antagonist regions of the Gikuyu. The omniscient narrator draws on the Gikuyu's cultural practices, particularly the rites of female circumcision at the riverbank as a source of collective identity.

NATIONALISM AS A UNIFYING FORCE

The writers' incentive to narrate realistic events during imperialism at a local level implies a sense of nationalism. As Odun Balogun contends, *God Bits of Woods* and *The River Between* are "nationalist anti-colonial novels of the 1950s and early 1960s" (vii). Essentially, by examining the hope of a new nationalism for Africans in both novels, we believe in the possibility of creating a new world. The form of resistance within these two novels reflects a nationalistic identity. In *God's Bits of Wood* and *The River Between*, nationalism is a crucial part of the writers' respective traditions. Fundamentally, by examining the hope of a new nationalism for Afri-

cans in the narratives, readers learn the ways in which a new society can stand against colonial domination/exploitation. The hope that inspires the leaders of the strike is translated by the vibrant voice of the narrator. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* reflects the same hope and/or vision which represents a nationalist anti-colonial awareness. Balogun discusses the thematization of early African authors and contend that:

Things Fall Apart subsequently became the thematic and artistic model for African nationalist prose, including *Weep Not, Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965), Ngugi's first two novels, which show how Europeans had not only torn the Kenyan culture and nation apart, but had also instituted the most inhuman form of colonial exploitation: settler colonialism (vii).

In this assertion, Balogun raises the question of content and form of the novel which is important for African scholars. While Ngugi refers to the West, he speaks to Kenyans and Africans at large. He avoids depicting his people as the exploited, manipulated and subjugated dupes of the Europeans. Instead, he leaves the reader in no doubt, as does Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, that the tribe contains the seeds of its own downfall (Rice 12). For example, in *The River Between*, by strengthening the educational institutions within the Gikuyu tribe, Waiyaki hopes to forge nationalist ties between the Makuyu and Kamenos ridges in an effort to resist imperialism. The narrator emphasizes the rites on which people in Kenya might build on to construct a nation.

In *God's Bits of Wood*, the narration offers examples of hope through the position of nationalistic identity. Although it concentrates on nationalism for Africa's independence, it is clear that, like those of Cheikh Anta Diop and Kwame Nkrumah, the discourse inscribes itself in a "firmly established Pan-African political tradition" (Gadjigo 113). In comparing Ngugi and Sembene, I come to the conclusion that Ngugi's advocacy for political independence is more ostensible than Sembene's which is articulated through the lens of Marxist humanism within which "he better perceived the specificity of Africa, then still under colonial rule and on the margins of the world" (125). However, both novels address imperialism and its effects through African literatures.

(DE)COLONIZATION AS A LIVED EXPERIENCE

Contemporary African writers have been concerned with the (post)colonial conditions of their nations. This is mirrored in how nationalist narratives are written in the early and mid-nineteen century. Of course, the purpose of articulating such narratives is often to look into national development but also speak back to Europeans. As discussed, "the colonial experience is a *live* experience in the *consciousness* of these people... the experience is a continuing *psychic* experience that has to be dealt with and will have to be dealt with long after the colonial situation formerly 'ends'" (Lomba 155). The obligation to deal with the experience of the African countries past in literature finds echo in Sembene's and Ngugi's appealing works. In *God's Bits of Wood* as well as in *The River Between*, religion and education operate as allegories of division. They determine most characters development as realistically described in both stories. Rather than

depicting the characters' conditions in a dreamy way, they are portrayed in their daily struggles with the mean realities of common existence. I locate these realist narratives at the junction of traditionality and modernity. While the former includes predominantly African heritage and practices, the latter relates mainly to Western religion and education.

The tryst between traditionality and modernity viewed through the lens of empire-building remains the source of the sociocultural disorder of the regions referred to in the novels. Colonization impacted—and continues to impact the West Africans' and Gikuyu's customs and traditions which shaped the common base of their knowledge and cultures. For instance, while some characters embrace Christianity in *The River Between*, others distance themselves from it. Its presence in the community has affected people's way of thinking and doing. Moreover, like Islamic practices, as used by some guides, Christianity has launched an antagonism between people of the same community. Sembene's narrative utilizes elements of religion to highlight the conflicts among the West African community. The narrator asserts that:

A campaign to demoralize and undermine the unity of the strikers—and particularly of their wives—had been undertaken by the men who were their 'spiritual guides', the Imams and the priests of other sects. After the prayers and religious services all over the city, there would be a sermon whose theme was always the same: 'By ourselves we are incapable of creating any sort of useful object, not even a needle; and yet you want to struggle against the *toubabs* who have brought us all of these things! It is madness. You would do better to be thinking God for having brought them among us and bettering our lives with the benefits of their civilization and their science (206)

The above assertion problematizes the vision of the *imams* (Islamic spiritual guides) who prefer the French civilization to the traditional values which for long unified people. Although economic reasons and fear for poverty trigger their motivations, it is clear that they are the ones who initiated the separation with the workers. Further, Islam which is a religion of justice, tolerance and peace, has become an instrument of personal interest. Some leaders turn it into a 'weapon' against the members of the same community. From the *imams*' perspective, a mixture of the French and the Senegalese cultures remains the solution to break away from imperialism.

The conflict that tears the Gikuyu community apart is the effect of the British politics. The omniscient narrator quickly draws the readers' attention on the Gikuyu's traditional life in the first chapter. Indeed, long before the British influx, the geographical division which gave birth to Kamenos and Gikuyu did not affect the good communal relationships that both sides of the river Honia had. On the contrary, "Honia was the soul of Kamenos and Makuyu. It joined them. And men, cattle, wild beasts and trees, were all united by this life—stream" (Ngugi 1). The ideal dream of universal friendship and peace suggested by these words hang on in the author's vocation. "But the white man had come to Siriana, and Joshua and Kabonyi had been converted. They abandoned the

ways of the ridges and followed the new faith. Still people shrugged their shoulders and went on with their work, whispering: 'Who from the outside can make his way into the hills?'" (Ngugi 7-8). Indigenous people already demonstrate their hostile attitude towards strangers who attempt to alter their standards of living.

The introduction of Christianity in the community becomes a source of misunderstanding. Joshua has already rejected his African heritage which creates a confusion in his household. Ironically, Muthoni, one of his daughters has gone through the act of initiation with her comrade of same age. Such defiance causes her runaway from Makuyu to Kameno to seek refuge from her aunt. Yes, this means to Joshua that, "Muthoni had ceased to exist on the very day that she had sold herself to the devil." (Ngugi 53). Not only is her circumcision a serious issue in the Gikuyu community but also it goes against her father and his new faith. The argument in here is to underscore the major goal of Livingstone who "advocated gradual method of eradicating the customs" (56) as seen with some traditional leaders in *God's Bits of Wood*. Rather than making room for a third space to paraphrase Homi Bhabha, the omniscient narrator portrays a conflict that substantiates the author's fear to witness his people's colonial damage deepen:

And then a woman came to him [Livingstone, the Head of the missionary center]. He was in his office and was startled to see her. Martha was one of the staunchest critics of policy.

'Excuse me, Reverend.'

'Yes?'

'Do you know the girl who died?'

'Muthoni? She was brought by Waiyaki and some other mission boys'

'You don't know her father'

'Eh ... no.'

'She is the daughter of —of —'

'Yes?'

'Joshua?' she said rather triumphantly. There was a twinkle in her eyes. There was a short space of total silence. And then —

'Oh!' It was a small groan. Almost pathetic.

The war was now on. (56-57)

The encounter of cultural beliefs illustrates a war that is ever declared to Joshua and to the mission. If Joshua is ready to abandon his old world for a new space of spirituality, it is clear that his family is not yet willing to follow him. Muthoni's ambivalence about the two worlds remains unquestionable. Also, a strong contradiction appears in her discourse when she tries to justify her obsession to the rite of genital mutilation. She asserts: "no one will understand. I say I am a Christian and my father and mother have followed the new faith. I have not run away from that. But I also want to be initiated into the ways of the tribe. How can I possibly remain as I am now?" (43). This challenging life informs on two things: an affection to domestic traditions and a lack of readiness for a new culture or faith. However, while the authorial voice is not against Christianity, I claim that it is against the ways in which it is forced to the Gikuyu community.

For Waiyaki knew that not all the ways of the white man were bad. Even his religion was not essentially bad. Some good, some truth shone through it. But the religion, the faith, needed washing, cleaning away all the dirt, living only the eternal. And that eternal that was the truth has to be reconciled to the traditions of the people. A people's traditions could not be swept away overnight. That way lay disintegration. Such a tribe would have no roots, for a people's roots were in their traditions going back to the past, the very beginning, Gikuyu and Mumbi. A religion that took no count of people's way of life, a religion that did not recognize spots of beauty and truths in their way of life, was useless (141)

The pervasiveness of the Christian religion in the narrative and the implicit suggestions of ways of accommodation with native people's morals validates the opinion that the author is not for its total rejection. There should be a compromise for both cultures and/or faiths to coexist and that makes the reconciliation difficult. Comparable to Joshua in *The River Between*, "the Imam of Dakar appears as a tool of French imperialism during his mediation between Ramatoulaye and the police and during his speech at the racecourse" (Jones 121). Several Muslim guides whose traditional role was to safeguard traditions, unite, and reconcile become tools of divergence and dissection. The members of the "Union des Jeunes" who "were Muslims" (Cooper 86) reject the proselytization that "God has decided that we should live side by side with the French *toubabs* and the French are teaching us things we have not known and showing us how to make the things we need" (Sembène 124). I argue that the ways in which Islam is either appropriated or manipulated create discontentment and anxiety in the youth. After all, it is not religion, but morally corrupt religious leaders that the French use to dominate the region that inspire contempt:

Là où l'islam est trop enraciné pour que le christianisme songe à l'ébranler avant longtemps, le colonisateur Européen s'appuie sur la religion de Mahomet qui, en beaucoup de circonstances, s'avère plus efficace que la chrétienté quelque peu entamée dans certains recoins par le virus de la pensée libre. C'est contre cette force d'inertie que Sembène a concentré l'essentiel de sa verve critique (Sikounmo 187)

The French offer Freedom and independent thinking through Christianity beyond deeply-rooted tenets of Islam to dismantle the community's traditions including workers and non-workers. To the image of *God's Bits of Wood*, old traditions represent a counter-force to modern practices in *The River Between*. One of the differences in the novels is how schools got quickly spread in the Gikuyu community. Narrators in both novels have given critical imageries of the ways in which some of the characters reject the French and British cultures. In both novels, the consequences of the Western influence have shaped a sort of ambivalence in the local people. While some individuals plead for a more modernized world through the establishment of schools, of hospitals, equal rights, etc. others fight for a community with an African heritage as a foundation. The exertions of Bakayoko (— and his Union) to transform his conditions of existence meets local sabotage when in *The River Between*, Waiyaki,

the teacher, faces difficulties to maintain a balance between old and new beliefs — his dreams of reconciliations collapse.

Yet, by presenting the Christian missionaries' challenge to the rituals of the "female circumcision" is the narrator not implicitly locating a space for a modernized world? Is this not problematizing old practices and promoting development through education? The point is that people are divided in their politics as of to keep African practices or ban some of them. In Makuyu, Joshua and his followers think that it is time for change. Kamenon in general remains faithful to customs. The growing conflict arises from the tragic death of Muthoni whose attempt to reconcile the two worlds fails. Besides such tragedy is Waiyaki's failure to bring both Kamenon and Makuyu together through education. Notwithstanding these occurrences, British imperialism encounters resistance in its "civilizing mission". As Nwankwo argues:

European settlers, particularly missionaries, conceived of their presence in Gikuyuland as part of a universal civilizing mission in which they were determined to deal with any 'barbaric manifestation of paganism'. The Gikuyu were not blind to the obvious advantages of the presence of this 'civilizing mission'. One advantage, for instance, was Western education. However, they were determined in their own way, to protect their culture from the inroads of Western civilization. Polygamy and circumcision were in the forefront of this conflict (18)

The point the author makes is clear: the Gikuyuland's uncertainty as of to embrace Western values or not including faith and education has been disastrous. Although the mission offers hope to people, they mostly remain faithful to their culture. The damages and/or conflicts inherent to empire-building are ostensible. An air of modernity creeps into the traditional zone though the local population show ambiguity to break away from domestic morals.

While the narrative style in *The River Between* neither condemns resolutely nor approves the absolute practices of the traditions, the one in *God's Bits of Wood*, is more decisive in addressing local African heritage barring. The rationale behind the French refusal to abide by the 'equal pay for equal work' rule lies in their conception of the African family. This sight seems to receive a reaction from Bakayoko who declares that, "... now they refuse to give us what we are asking for, on the pretext that our wives and our mothers are concubines, and we and our sons are bastards!" (186). Ironically, that is Dejean's (French manager) arrogant dismissal of the polygamous family that clearly helps demonstrate the West African community's attachment to its traditional tenets. Dejean's critiques simply implies a suggestion of monogamy, a Western value justified by capitalism.

The narrator's discursive point of view speaks in opposition to the European conception of the African family. Bakayoko's consent to remarry his deceased brother's wife speaks to the African culture. And, of course, culture here cannot be dissociated with language. Old Niakoro's refusal to speak French, the culture of the other, further corroborates this thought. I argue that the rhetorical force behind such awareness finds solace in the narrator's opinion that holds polygamy as a constructive social system. Although the French criticize this cultural practice, the reader realizes

that it is what holds West Africans together. Polygamy as a cultural theme is also present in *Xala* (1973), a novel Sembene will turn later into a film. However, in this narrative, El Hadji's difficulties unveils the weaknesses intrinsic to polygamy, a social practice that has its own consequences.

As compared to Old Niakoro, the narrator portrays N'Deye Touti as someone caught up between two cultures. The schooling she receives from the teachers' training school gives her a considerable advantage over the boys. As a woman, her position of public scribe for the whole neighborhood (Sembene 57) is symbolic. The point here is that the familiarity with books and "theatres where she had seen visions of mountain chaplet deep in snow" (57) problematizes women's education and stresses their contribution to the decolonizing process. N'Deye Touti constantly navigates from book knowledge to real life situation. To the image of Muthoni in *The River Between*, she will sometimes embrace the foreign culture but will quickly resume her own community. She is at the juncture of traditionality and modernity as the narrator reports:

She lived in a kind of separate world; the reading she did, the films she saw, made her part of a universe in which her own people had no place, and by the same token she no longer had a place in theirs. [...]. The people among whom she lived were polygamous, and it had not taken her long to realize that this kind of union had nothing to do with love — at least not with love as she imagined it. And this, in turn, had made her recognize what she now called 'the lack of civilization' of her own people (Sembene 57)

As described, N'Deye Touti is a product of domestic and French cultures. Her ambivalence and dissidence result to her rejection. Clearly, questioning polygamy and traditional practices alike ultimately leads to disappointment and victimization in this West African community. Despite what she calls a 'lack of civilization' she continues the battle together with men. I contend that the narrator uncovers more than what is described in this passage. The message is a warning against the dangers of westernizing a world which is not yet ready for it.

Different from N'Deye Touti, Old Niakoro, Fa Keita, and Maimouna are undeniably guardians of African traditions. Not only do they embody traditionalism but they resist the French cultural influence. They distance themselves from any discourse or attempt to refer to the European culture. For example, Old Niakoro has a different position about Diara's trial. "You are not *Toubabs!* How can you judge a man who is respected by everyone", she cried (Sembene 87). She goes further by stating that she is going to burn the girl's books. Fa Keita backed up the old woman by declining any responsibility for a breaking of the traditional principles to humiliate an individual. While speaking to the young people's attitude and to the hearing process, Fa Keita said: "In any case do not count on me." This statement resounds like an indignation against foreign practices.

'There would be no point to it,' Fa Keita said. 'It would change nothing.'

'But think of it! To allow the honor of such a good man to be dragged through the mud — a man of such a good

family! It is the *toubabs* who are to blame for. These children will never have white hairs –our world is falling apart.’

‘No woman; it was your son who said, “Our world is opening up.”’ (Sembène 87)

The tensions between both generations are typical to the actions they take. The community is divided as seen in *The River Between*. Fa Keita and Old Niakoro let the readers grasp their anxieties through the inquisitorial voice of the narrator. The novel offers a platform for women who not only have their voices heard during the strike but also demonstrate their power. Although we are led to think of them as voiceless and subjugated individuals we come to capture the role they played in the process of decolonization. They draw from their individual, collective, practical and spiritual forces to restore justice and equity.

As in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, things really fall apart in Fa Keita and Old Niakoro’s world. In other instances in the novel, Old Niakoro witnessed attitudes and behaviors which signal a rupture with local traditions that upholds their society’s segments. She rails against the youth’s undertaking in “deciding on a strike” (2) without the elders. Another strong moment in the novel is the debate about girls’ education. Bakayoko’s mother rejects any possibility of validating the necessity of learning the French culture. Readers father capture the opposition through Old Niakoro and her granddaughter’s dialogue. Like Muthoni and Nyambura who exemplify the new generation in *The River Between*, young Ad’jibid’ji bears the hope of a new generation.

For three days we have been grinding, and I was always there.

And tonight I cleaned up from the meal. *Alors!*

Ad’jibid’ji has spoken the last word in French.

‘*Aloss, aloss!*’ her grandmother screamed as if trying to wrench the words from the child’s lips. ‘You speak to me, to your father’s mother, and you say ‘*aloss!*’ The white men say “aloss” when they call their dogs, and my granddaughter talks to me the same way!’ (Sembène 5)

The potential development of this conversation implies a cultural fragmentation. The author draws from a colonial world to interpret the French culture and anticipate on some West Africans challenges in the narrative. This confrontation is the consequence of the Westernization of African cultures. Both authors in the novels deliberately portray the double experience that West and East African communities in the novels face.

CONCLUSION

God’s Bits of Wood and *The River Between* can be read as realist novels. Both novelists look back at the (post)colonial past of their respective communities. The brief but general overview offered at the beginning of this paper provides with a core idea of each text. This paper addresses separately the setting and the subject matter of the narratives. One of the connections of these texts is the authors’ options to set their narratives in colonial times but also to address local concerns. Islam and Christianity have been at the intersection of modernity and traditionality in *God’s Bits of Woods* and *The River Between* respectively. Although there were

traditional practices long before imperialism, it is clear that most characters’ experiences demonstrate how imperialism has affected them.

In *God’s Bits of Woods*, the plot opens up with a confrontation of customs and cultures. One of the analytical point of the novel is the component of the worlds it depicts. For example, Islam is a vital tool through which the internal forces that partners with the French are exposed. At the heart of all this is the conflict of generation and the desire to modernize traditions. The novel reflects a nationalistic approach that underlies Sembène’s everlasting struggle against imperialism and its corollaries. Conspicuously, the narrative addresses the groundbreaking potentials essential in the daily lives of West Africans with reference to colonization, feminism, and class struggles.

Most traditionalists rely on old individuals, knowing that they are more likely better in keeping traditions than the other groups of society. The cases of Old Niakoro and Fa Keita substantiate this opinion. They are used in the narratives as avant-gardists of the West African traditions. The French education has raised awareness in the youth. Furthermore, our study shows that a hypocrite use of Islam coupled with Christianity made it hard for the local traditions to remain unaffected. Also, one of the variances the two novels have together is the components of the separate world they depict.

The realistic representation of the social role of the Gikuyu customs in *The River Between* provides an important understanding of (post)colonial Gikuyuland. The background which begins the novel –chapter one –sheds light on the traditional and peaceful life of this part of Kenya. Also, the metaphor of the sleeping lions in the narrative shows the preexisting danger prior to colonization which the region always contained. The analysis of the narrative reveals a disruption of such a way of life whose central theme is grounded on celebrations of rites and rituals. The introduction of Christianity has broadened the gap and created more frustration in Gikuyuland. The Kameno people are reluctant to the ways in which modernity is forced to them whereas the Kikuyu people are more opened to change. Religion, traditions and modernity operate the same way in both novels with the mere difference that in *God’s Bits of Wood*, not only has Islam existed before Christianity but also some community members utilize it against others for individual rather than collective cultural purposes.

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