

**REVUE EUROPÉENNE
DU
DROIT SOCIAL**

Maison d'édition **Bibliotheca**

Atestée par le Ministère de la Culture et des Cultes
avec l'avis no. 4363 / 27.05.1997

Acriditée par le Conseil National de la Recherche
Scientifique (CNCS), 2011-2014

Membre de l'Association des Editeurs de Roumanie –
AER (Romanian Publishers Association – RPA)

N. Radian, KB 2/3, Târgoviște, 130062

tel/fax: 0245.212241

e-mail: biblioth@gmail.com

www.bibliotheca.ro

**REVUE EUROPÉENNE
DU
DROIT SOCIAL**

Volume XLII • ISSUE 1 • Year 2019

Édition **Bibliotheca**
Târgoviște, 2019

**La Revue est reconnue par le
Conseil National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNCS)
catégorie B+ avec avis no. 828/2007
En évidence BDI Copernicus, CEEOL, EBSCO Publishing
et DESY Publication Database**

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130051, Târgoviște, Aleea Trandafirilor, bl. 10, ap. 46
Județul Dâmbovița, Roumanie, Tel. 0722.723340
www.RevueEuropéenne_du_DroitSocial.ro

ISSN 2393 – 073X
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Literary Apprehension of the Cult of the Ancestors in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments*

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Abstract

This article aims at examining the cult of the ancestors in the society depicted in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments*. In the Akan society of Ghana to which the writer belongs, as in many other African societies, the ancestors are worshipped and people believe that those ancestors watch over the living from the world of the dead. In those societies where the cult of the ancestors is practised, people rely on their ancestors for the success of their present and future social events. Through this novel, Armah shows that African civilisation can be relived through literature. The study has found that the cult of the ancestors or ancestor worship is a reality in African societies through the case study of *Fragments*. In other words, it endeavours to show the ancestors' importance in the lives of the living in the depicted society through Armah's fiction.

Key words: cult, ancestors, Akan society, worship, importance.

Résumé

Cet article vise à examiner le culte des ancêtres dans la société peinte dans *Fragments* d'Ayi Kwei Armah. Dans la société Akan du Ghana à laquelle l'écrivain appartient, comme dans plusieurs autres sociétés africaines, les ancêtres sont adorés et les gens pensent que ces ancêtres veillent sur les vivants du monde des morts. Dans ces sociétés où le culte des ancêtres est pratiqué, les gens comptent sur leurs ancêtres pour le succès de leurs présents et futurs événements sociaux. A travers ce roman, Armah montre que la civilisation africaine peut être revécue à travers la littérature. L'étude a découvert que le culte des ancêtres ou l'adoration des ancêtres est une réalité dans les sociétés africaines à travers l'étude de *Fragments*. En d'autres termes, il s'efforce de montrer l'importance des ancêtres dans les vies des vivants dans la société peinte à travers la fiction d'Armah.

Mots clés : culte, ancêtres, société Akan, adoration, importance.

Introduction

Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments* reveals how the cult of the ancestors is practised in the depicted society. "Cult" can be defined as "a system of religious worship through rituals." So, "the cult of the ancestors" refers to "the worship of the ancestors through rituals." The living constantly have recourse to the ancestors and implore their help and protection through the cult of the ancestors because it is very important for them. However, despite its importance, it is neglected by most Africans. The novelist uses literature to show the value of African civilisation which maintains that the ancestors occupy an important place because they are believed to be at the beginning and at the end of everything that has happened, happens, or will happen in the world of the living. In more accurate terms, they are believed to keep an eye on the living from their dwelling place in the underworld or spiritland. As such, they intervene whenever they are invoked by the living through rituals, sacrifices or ceremonies.

The study of *Fragments* sheds light on the ancestors' importance in the African context. The study deals with three sections: (1) Old People, Intermediaries between the Living and the Dead (2) Libation: an Invocation of the Ancestors for Protection and (3) Premature Child: a Potential Ancestor.

1. Old People, Intermediaries between the Living and the Dead

In his second novel, *Fragments*, Armah deviates from the theme of his first novel by adding a theme which has to do with civilisation, and more precisely with the cult of the ancestors. In the novel, he makes old people appear as intermediaries between the living and the dead. As their representative among the living in the novel, Naana is a prototype of such old people. She is the custodian of the cult of the ancestors and of traditional religious beliefs at large. Ennin and Nkansah (2016, p. 74) corroborate that idea in these terms: “Baako’s grandmother, *Naana* is presented by Ayi Kwei Armah as an embodiment of tradition. [...]. Her name indicates that she is an elder, *Naana*, a derivative of *Nana* (elder) is the most elderly person in the household [...].” Armah has therefore chosen her name (Naana) on purpose because of the great mission that he assigns her despite her blindness. He skilfully makes her communicate with the dead whom she refers to as ‘those gone before’, ‘the old ones gone before’, ‘the departed ones’ or ‘ghosts’. By doing so, he corroborates what Achebe (1958, p. 111) says in *Things Fall Apart*: “The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them [...] because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man’s life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors.”

Armah suggests that because of Naana’s old age, she is half way between the world of the dead and the world of the living. Naana herself refers to her closeness to her ancestors when she says: “I am a person no more, unable to help myself. What is still left of my bones and of the flesh that clings to it would make a small enough burden for any head [...].” (p. 2). Her physical condition as a blind old woman is symbolic. That symbolic blindness through which she can see things which people who have eyes are unable to see may imply that traditional African values cannot be replaced by new ones in matters regarding the ancestors. Unlike the rest of the family, she is not blinded by the gleam. Armah has used her blindness as a satire on the “eyed” people. It is one of the ironies in the novel that without eyes, she sees more than anybody else. But endowed with voice and speaking ability, she speaks little: “If I see things unseen by those who have eyes, why should my wisest speech not be silence?” (p. 2). She no longer considers herself as a person or rather as a human being. On the contrary, because she is too old, she considers herself as being nearer to the dead than to the living. In other words, she looks upon herself as being closer to the world of the dead than to that of the living. Her status confers on her supernatural powers that ordinary people do not have. For instance, she is sure that Baako will come back safely from his journey to the United States probably because she has been told so by the ancestors whose mouthpiece she is and whom she represents on earth. She is at peace with her world because she knows that Baako will eventually return. Her belief in the inevitability of Baako’s return is in sharp contrast with the fear of her daughter, Efua, Baako’s mother. She is shocked to learn about the feelings of Efua about her son and expresses her surprise in these terms: “Oh, great friend, a human mother should not have such dreams against ... her own flesh and her loved one’s soul” (p. 2). The novelist denounces the attitudes of ordinary people who see things which are real in terms of wishes that they formulate contrary to Naana who sees them as real things. “In her blindness

she sees those truths which are denied to people with the power of sight. Her seeing eye is a spiritual opposition to the blind seeing eyes around her” (Peterson, 1979, p. 53). She has a psychological union with the mythical past of her community. Her prayers bear ample testimony to her psychological union with that mythical past:

[...] bring us your blessings and fruits,
your blessings
your help
in this life you have left us to fight alone.
With your wisdom
let him go,
let him come. (p. 6)

In a flashback, Naana’s blind eyes visualise the parting scene, the day Baako left for overseas. Owing to the awareness born of her isolation, Naana has a premonition that her grandchild will suffer loneliness and isolation resulting from physical displacement. She asserts: “Sometimes I know my blindness was sent to me to save me from the madness that would ... have come with seeing so much that was not to be understood” (p. 10). Her way of apprehending this world is a traditional one and the traditional ceremonies and rituals are of great significance and meaning to her. The tradition which she represents is that of precolonial Ghana, now almost completely lost, completely forgotten.

Armah opposes the fact that Naana is waged down as a witch simply because she can communicate with the ancestors whose messages she delivers. He does not approve of the fact that ordinary people fail to acknowledge her role or find it difficult to understand or accept her as a representative of the ancestors. Certainly, Armah’s intention to establish a bridge between Naana and her ancestors is a way of acknowledging the importance of elderly people in African societies. Apart from being the mouthpiece of the ancestors, the novelist makes Naana the mouthpiece of traditional Africa on whose behalf she is acting. Abdou (2015, p. 176) corroborates that idea when he writes: “Armah uses the character of Naana to represent the values of the old Africa.” This justifies why Naana expresses her personal feelings about the change brought in traditional Africa through Africans’ contact with the Western world. The life and death cycle is discussed in terms of Naana’s own imminent death and the birth and outdooring of Araba’s son. When she dies, she will become an ancestral spirit. These spirits are as real to the clan or family as its living members. They are supposed to be imbued with more wisdom and power than mortals, and sacrifices are made to them to ensure their guidance and protection. Armah’s portrayal of death is thus an elevation into a higher state of being, but one which has close connections with this life and which in many ways resembles it. Naana considers herself as being towards the end of that cycle, or rather near the world of the dead from where she will start a new cycle once she dies. That is why she says: “My spirit is straining for another beginning in a place where there 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” (p. 196).

The significance of the title of the novel is reflected in the precolonial wisdom and traditional thinking of Naana as a wise old woman: “The larger meaning which lent sense to every small

thing ... has shattered into a thousand and thirty useless pieces. Things have passed [...] never seen whole [...]. What remains of my days will be filled with more broken things” (p. 196). Naana’s viewpoint on death is clear: “Death. That was the frightening thing, the final sound. Now I see in it another birth, just as among you the birth of an infant here is mourned as the traveling of another spirit” (p. 200). In addition, on the last page of the novel, she declares: “I am here against the last of my veils. Take me. I am ready. You are the end, the beginning, you who have no end, I am coming” (p. 201).

2. Libation: an Invocation of the Ancestors for Protection.

Armah uses the libation organised on the eve of Baako’s departure for the United States as an evocation of the ancestors for the traveller’s protection in *Fragments*. The importance of the ceremony lies in the fact that because Baako is going abroad, he needs his ancestors’ protection and guidance so that he should have a safe journey, a happy sojourn, and a safe return at the end of his studies. In the course of the libation, the writer makes Baako’s uncle, Foli, invoke the ancestors so that they should accompany Baako throughout the difficult task that he has to fulfil. That ritual is so capital that Naana closely watches Foli while he is performing it so that he should not fail anywhere in the proceedings. Armah’s revival of such a traditional practice is outstanding. So, there is no wonder when Naana expresses her satisfaction as far as the exactitude of the words pronounced by Foli is concerned in these terms:

[...] his words had a perfect completeness that surprised me and told me the departed ones are still watching over those they left here above. Even Foli felt their presence. His soul within those hours left the heavy body so as to be with the departed ones, to ask their help upon the head of the one about to go. Nothing was said then that was not to be said, and nothing remained unsaid for which there was a need. (p. 3)

In the world depicted in Armah’s novel, the ancestors are believed to watch over those who are still alive and their presence can be felt only by initiated people like Naana and Foli. More importantly, as Naana puts it, Foli’s soul has left his heavy body so as to be with ‘the departed ones’ in the course of the ritual. It means that the person who performs such a ritual ceases to be a human being from its beginning to its end. Foli is therefore possessed by a spirit which momentarily takes him to the world of the ancestors. Thus, although his physical body, which Naana calls ‘heavy flesh’, can still be seen by all the people attending the ceremony, he is spiritually with the ancestors whom he asks for protection on behalf of his nephew, Baako. Through the libation, Armah insinuates that although the ancestors are believed to be present among the living to protect them whenever need be, their presence does not imply that they systematically protect the living. So, the latter have to invoke them first and draw their attention to whatever they expect from them. They are considered as the guardians of those who are still alive. For that reason, the living should offer them regular sacrifices to motivate and stimulate them so that they should not fail in their mission. In Baako’s case, the ancestors’ mission is to protect him from his departure for the USA to his return, including his sojourn there. In the first part of the prayer, Foli says:

Where you are going,
go softly.
Nananom,
you who have gone before,
see that his body does not lead him
into snares made for the death of spirits.
You who are going now,
do not let your mind become persuaded
that you walk alone.
There are no humans born alone. [...].
Do not be persuaded you will fill your stomach faster
if you do not have others' to fill.
There are no humans who walk this earth alone. (p. 3-4)

The prayer above is not only an invocation to the ancestors to protect Baako from the beginning to the end of his difficult task, but it is also an encouragement and advice to him. When Foli asks Baako not to let his mind become persuaded that he walks alone, he implicitly tells him that his ancestors will be with him and implores them to guide him and to be with him there so that he may not feel alone because 'there are no humans born alone'. More importantly, when Foli asks him not to be persuaded he will fill his stomach faster if he does not have others' to fill, he tells him not to forget the people that he has left at home. He advises him to think about them as soon as he comes back by sharing whatever good things he will bring back with them.

Since the ritual is a libation, only drinks are used by being poured on the ground for the ancestors who are believed to live in the underworld. So, this drink should frequently be poured out from the beginning to the end of the ceremony. However, Armah deplores the fact that Foli has waited long before pouring out the first drops which are "little miserly drops" in fact. This is justified by the fact that Naana thinks that Foli has delayed the pouring out of the first drops and accuses him of pouring 'miserly drops' at last:

Only after those words did Foli think to begin pouring out the schnapps he had been holding in those hands of his which hate so much to let hot drink escape. He had kept the spirits waiting like begging children for the drink of their own libation and, thirsty drunkard that he has always been, even when at last he began to pour it out he only let go of [sic] little miserly drops, far from enough to end the long thirst of a single one of those gone before. (p. 5)

Armah denounces the dislocation of African traditional religion because of the greed of some of its practitioners through the character of Naana. That is why he makes her fear that while delaying the pouring out of the drink to the ancestors till almost the middle of the ceremony, Foli may cause them to fail to accept his prayers, and the whole ceremony may be a failure. Of course, if the normal course of the ceremony is followed, the spirits should not be kept waiting; instead, they should be given enough drink, not the little miserly drops that Foli has poured them out. It means that their thirst should be quenched through the libation that is intended for them. Naana acknowledges that Foli has performed the ceremony with perfect words, with nothing missing and nothing added that should not have been there. However, the simple fact that he has deliberately chosen to pour out little miserly drops of the drink with the intention of keeping the rest for himself is extremely bad. The narrator tells us that after pouring out those little miserly drops, Foli has carried on the prayer in these terms:

Always
there has been a danger in such departures. [...].

Always
the danger of death [...].

There are dangers in this life
but fathers [...]
Watch over him
and let him prosper
there where he is going. [...].

With your wisdom
let him go,
let him come.

And you, traveler about to go,
Go and return,
Go, come. (pp. 5-6)

The continuation of the prayer further invokes the ancestors so that they should protect Baako, the traveller. Armah considers the success of the prayer, including the pouring out of the drink at regular intervals, as the success of the libation. At the end of the prayer, Naana once more acknowledges that “Even coming from a man himself so blemished, they were perfect words” (p. 6). So, it is clear that although Foli is a drunkard, he has not forgotten the right words to be pronounced throughout the ceremony. However, Naana thinks that he has cheated the ancestors by keeping more than half of the bottle of schnapps for himself. She deplores Foli’s attitude in these terms: “The pig Foli, in spite of the beauty of the words he had spoken, remained inside his soul a lying pig. A shameful lot more than a whole half bottle of the drink had remained unpoured [...]” (pp. 6-7). At this level, the novelist denounces the fact that the ancestors may not accept the ceremony because of Foli’s bad attitude. Probably, Foli, in his drunkenness, forgets that if the ancestors are not satisfied, they will not accomplish the mission expected from them. So, the circle which has remained unbroken so far may be broken by Foli as Naana puts it: “I looked from the young man to his uncle, and then my blood was poisoned with the fear of what would happen if Foli’s greed for drink was allowed to break the circle and to spoil all the perfect beauty of the libation” (p. 7). It is obvious that Foli’s intention is to drink the remaining schnapps alone insofar as when Naana asks him to pour her out the drink, he does not think it worthwhile to do so on the grounds that schnapps is so strong. Armah thus uses Foli’s perseverance in his deliberate intention to spoil the ritual to show the extent to which the libation is altered by the young generation. At the same time, he uses Naana perseverance to correct Foli’s mistakes related to the pouring out of the drink as a proof that the old generation is highly conservative. That is the reason why Naana insists that Foli should pour the drink to the brink of the glass. She recounts the scene in these terms:

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

Armah makes Naana pour out the whole glass of schnapps to the ancestors so that they should

drink and quench their thirst, go with Baako, protect him well, and bring him back to them safe.

Although it may seem superstitious, Naana's action is justified by the fact that she can sense and feel whether the ancestors are satisfied with the ritual performed by Foli or not. She justifies her action in these terms:

"It was not enough," [...]. "I am not quarreling with you: it was not enough. You learned so well the words you spoke to the dead ones this night. Did no one also teach you the power of the anger of the departed? How did you forget, then? Or was the present growling of your belly a greater thing than Baako's going and the whole stream of his life after that? The spirits would have been angry, and they would have turned their anger against him. He would have been destroyed." (p. 8)

Through Naana, the writer insinuates that Foli's attitude would cause a great havoc to Baako if she did not pour out more drink to quench the thirst of the ancestors. As a specialist of the cult of the ancestors, Naana is aware that once the ritual is not performed well, the ancestors may show their anger, not forcibly by making Baako die, but by influencing negatively the whole stream of his life after that. So, a poor libation may cause the ancestors' anger or wrath instead of entailing their protection. To prevent such a catastrophe, Naana decides to appease them before it is too late. Her prompt reaction is further related to the fact that Foli's greed for drink should break the circle which exists between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Referring to that fact, Abdou (2015, p. 176) declares:

Foli's greed for drink will break the welded circle existing for years between the world of the livings [sic] and that of the dead. His drunken gluttony then contributes to the subversion of the relationship between the ancestors and their offspring.

Naana's reaction at that point is quick and effective because she knows the importance of the offerings. She takes the schnapps and offers the libation herself. Armah describes the scene in the first person singular to demonstrate the importance accorded to the sacrifice by the representative of the bygoners who thinks that she stop the undoing of the Black Race.

Abdou shows that Foli's awkward behaviour may hinder the bond that the living have established with the dead from time immemorial. So, Naana's prompt reaction in order to correct Foli's mistake is welcome. Armah thus shows the importance of the libation by making her normalise the situation before it is too late. To highlight the outstanding role played by Naana in the novel, L. B. Abdou (2015, p. 175) writes: "Naana [...] is complaining about the social, cultural and political decay in Africa through the Ghanaian experience. Although she is not the heroine in *Fragments*, she plays an important role as the guardian of the remaining ancestral traditions." Foli's failure to perform the ritual according to the norms highlights the negligence of the young generation whom he represents. L. B. Abdou (2015, p. 176) corroborates that idea in these terms: "Naana is ready to fulfil her mission. As long as she is alive, she will not accept any marginalization of the ancestral rites. The negligence of the new generation [...] to perform the traditional rituals gradually destroys the members of the community and the remaining African ancestral religion is collapsing." The collapse of that religion, which Naana desperately seeks to prevent, implies that Armah denounces the destruction of spirituality in traditional Africa. He uses

that old woman as the eyewitness of the collapse of traditional African religion. Ogede (1991, pp. 532-533) corroborates this viewpoint by arguing:

It is not a coincidence that in *Fragments*, it is the old woman Naana who witnesses and report[s] the origin of the decline of spirituality both in the episode in which Foli ... drinks up the wine for the supposed ancestral libation ... and at the ceremony marking the outdooring of Araba's child where Korankye cheats the ancestors in the same manner.

The violation of rituals exposes people's change of mentality in the Akan society. This act of distortion of rituals shows great disrespect for the spirits of the ancestors. The violation of these rituals reflects the degeneration of the neo-Ghanaian society. Naana's voice is the voice of the wise elder who witnesses the ideal past which is threatened. She complains about the erosion and distortion of African civilisation by an alien system of values and reveals her respect for the order under siege. The death of Araba's child is attributable to the abuse of tradition which provokes the anger of the ancestors and causes them to withdraw their protection, thus, allowing humans to be vulnerable to antagonistic forces. Naana's role as the guardian of a cherished traditional religion is outstanding. This is justified by the fact that despite the materialism which characterises the modern world in which she finds herself, she fully plays her role as the sole survivor of a "lost past." Armah uses imagery and metaphor throughout the novel to highlight the ancestors' importance as revealed in the quotation below:

Fragments abounds in image-complexities: fragmentation, wholeness of vision and a saving blindness, walls between worlds. But there are two leading metaphors. Firstly, the image of the returning ghost recurs in the various forms of the resurrected cargo-spirit in Baako's analogies, the reincarnated ancestor in Naana's traditional Akan beliefs [...]. These figures advance concurrently across the novel's seamless myth-fabric, each amplifying a pattern of outward passage, the suffering of an actual or figurative death and rebirth into an altered state, and a beneficial return, bearing what may be doubtful blessings. In the multilayered tapestry sentences like the following, from Naana's dream – "But Baako walked among them neither touched nor seen, like a ghost in an overturned world in which all human flesh was white" (15) – contrive to conflate allusion to cargo ghosts, the ancestral dead turned white in the spirit world [...]. (Wright, 1990, p. 32)

Death and rebirth refer to the idea of reincarnation whereby a dead ancestor comes back from the world of the ancestors and takes a human form so as to be reborn. This corroborates Naana's philosophy of circle which means continuity as long as it is not broken. Even a child or baby who dies becomes an ancestor who can be reborn. The evidence that the ancestors occupy an important place in the daily lives of the living is highlighted by D. Wright (1990, p. 33) in these terms:

Naana's fear that the scant libations at Baako's departure and the outdooring will provoke ancestors and elders alike into withdrawing their protection from the young travelers [sic] are born out by events: Baako is driven to madness, and his nephew, as foreseen, dies. No one listens to Naana, however (other than Baako), and her moral imperatives constitute a backcloth of obsolete, nonfunctioning values that constantly declare their failing relevance to the modern world. In the final chapter which brings the novel's year full circle, she dies from a world of impenitent materialism (to be reborn, in her own mind, into the world of the ancestors) and, since she is imaged as the sole survivor of a lost past whose precious beliefs die with her, her release into the spirit community betokens the continuing spiritual captivity of the living one.

Wright clearly shows that Naana's fear that the libation may be a failure is justified by a number of sad events which have occurred after it. It is difficult to accept such an affirmation, since Naana

has already corrected Foli's mistake. However, his idea that no one, except Baako, listens to Naana is undeniable. Armah chooses to make Baako the sole interlocutor who understands Naana and gets her complete attention. This is shown through her decision to go and see Baako off at the airport despite her physical condition: "I had indeed asked to go the last miles with the departing one. There had been many things in me for him, but they were not things I could say, and so sitting close to him would be good" (p. 9). While seeing Baako off at the airport, Naana probably intends to transmit a kind of supernatural power to him, and to succeed in doing so, she simply needs to sit close to him. She is delighted that the libation has taken place before his departure in such a way that "The circle was not broken in any place" (p. 11). Naana sees things in terms of circle, a circle which goes round continually without being broken if the normal course of things is followed. She declares:

Everyone who goes returns. He will come. He will be changed, but we shall welcome him as the same. That is the circle. There has been a lot of cruelty done, but nothing has been done so grave that in this case the circle should be broken. Nothing was left out before he was taken up into the sky to cross the sea and to go past the untouchable horizon itself. I watched everything that night, and [...] I would myself have stopped the drunken Foli if he had gone wrong anywhere, adding things unknown to those gone before, or leaving out any of the words and actions they have left us to guide us on the circular way. Nothing at all was left out. The uncle called upon the nephew the protection of the old ones gone before. The circle was not broken. The departed one will return. (p. 3)

While insistently referring to the circle, Naana means that there is continuity of life in death and that the living must be continually in contact with the dead. Her readiness to join the ancestors does not mean that she has failed in her mission. On the contrary, it means that she is eager to be dead and reborn so that she can start a new circle again.

3. Premature Child: a Potential Ancestor

Armah refers to the idea that a premature child is a potential ancestor to further show the ancestors' importance in traditional Africa. A premature child is a child born before the end of the normal period or duration of the pregnancy. Untimely birth is considered as a bad omen because a premature baby may not live and may choose to join the ancestors very soon after its birth. That is why Naana is scandalised when Araba, her granddaughter, is about to give birth to a premature child: "'It is the baby; I smelled blood,' [...]. 'But, Great Friend, this is such an early time for him to come, if he is to stay now'" (p. 72). Despite her blindness, Naana can smell blood without seeing it as Araba is about to give birth because apart from being close to the ancestors, she is also close to the unborn. As a custodian of African traditions, she knows that the child cannot survive if he comes to life prematurely.

In the Akan society, the outdooring ceremony is organised on the eighth day following the child's birth, whether he is normal or premature. The novelist denounces materialism which leads people to neglect such an important feature of African civilisation. For instance, in the novel, the outdooring of Araba's child, Angel, is brought forward to coincide with payday, with the result that the child is exposed too soon because of the greed of his grandmother, Efua, and his mother, Araba. They intentionally bypass their traditional norms by organising the premature child's outdooring on the fifth day following his birth because of their lust for money. Their decision to

propone the premature child's outdooring lies in the fact that they believe that it will be useless if it is held after payday because they will not get enough money. Baako tries to stop them in vain by asking: "Are you so pressed you have to make money out of the child?" (p. 88).

Armah denounces the collapse of African traditions because of the carelessness and greed of some Africans. Abdou (2015, pp. 176-177) refers to that collapse as the disintegration of the black race: "[...] I can affirm that the disintegration of the Black race is precipitated [in *Fragments*] by the young generation who do not care about the survival of the old order. These youngsters are more concerned with material things rather than wasting their time on ancestral values. They think that money is above all." The attitude of the young generation who cause the old order, or rather their ancestral values, to die down simply because of their lust for material things is deplorable. Because of money, Araba and her mother, Efua, are ready to transgress their ancestral religion. Complaining about that sad fact, Abdou (2015, p. 177) writes: "The transgression of the ancestral religion is made here by money. The attempt to outdoor the new-born baby only five days after its birth is a travesty of traditions and, naturally, Naana is astonished to hear [about] it [...]." The writer does not approve of the fact that although Naana is the eldest person in the family, she is not informed about the outdooring ceremony. She expresses her astonishment when Baako finally informs her about it in these terms:

"Five days," the old woman whispered in her astonishment. "Five days. The child is not yet with us. He is in the keeping of the spirits still, and already they are dragging him out into this world for eyes in heads that have eaten flesh to gape at." (p. 97)

According to Naana, the child is still kept by the spirits and as such, he should not come out. As Abdou (2015, p. 177) puts it, "This act, as Naana understands it, contributes to the degeneration of the traditional religious beliefs of the Ghanaians. The fake ceremony in *Fragments* directed by Korankye, to atone the anger of the ancestors, does nothing but inciting them [to get angrier]. Naana concludes that the infant will not last long." Naana deplores that sad fact in these terms:

"The child is one of the uncertain ones. If he stays, he may bring great things." [...]. "They themselves say he refused the world several times. And it should have made them think, the way he finally came. It was weeks before his time." [...]. "[...] Often a quick child like that is only a disturbed spirit come to take a brief look and go back home. But I am too old. Let me say this to them and inside their hearts they will accuse me, calling me a witch who would take the infant life just to lengthen mine." (p. 97)

Armah raises the problem of generation conflict which prevents the young generation from acknowledging the importance of the old generation. Abdou (2015, p. 177) corroborates that idea when he writes: "Naana, who is considered as the "eyes" of the ancestors and the guardian of the traditions, reveals a great secret to Baako. She knows that the infant will not stay because of his mother and grandmother's haste, and she laments the fact that the new generation does not respect the traditional religious system since it cannot differentiate a witch from an experienced elder." The writer considers Naana's wisdom as paramount. That is why he denounces the failure of the young generation to abide by her wisdom in matters regarding African civilisation. As a matter of

fact, the outdoor ceremony is a matter which should be placed under her responsibility if the normal course of things was followed.

As the guardian of their traditions, she is the only person who knows the normal procedure to be followed so that the outdoor ceremony should be organised well. Because her words are never heeded by Efua and Araba, she has opted to watch them do as they please. The way Naana is treated by the young generation is deplorable because as an elderly person with an immense wisdom, she does not deserve such a treatment. On the contrary, they should take advantage of her wisdom and perpetuate it from generation to generation.

Baako and Naana represent tradition and ancestral wisdom; they are against the outdoor ceremony, but fail in the pursuit. Naana knows that the child is still in the “keeping” of the spirits and that they should not hurry “dragging him out into this world for eyes in heads that have eaten flesh to gape at” (p. 97). However, she is more helpless than Baako in preventing them from proceeding with the ritual. She knows that their planning is not good for the child and warns:

“[...] You know the child is only a traveler between the world of spirits and this one of heavy flesh. His birth can be a good beginning, and he may find his body and this world around it a home where he wants to stay. But for this he must be protected. Or he will run screaming back, fleeing the horrors prepared for him up here. [...]” (p. 97)

Armah denounces the fact that the normal course of things is not followed in the process of the child’s outdoor ceremony despite the fact that he was born prematurely. However, even if the child was born within the normal period of the pregnancy, the outdoor ceremony has to be organised according to the requirements of tradition. Ga and Akan traditions are strict as far as the outdoor ceremony is concerned. Manoukian (1980, p. 89) substantiates this in these terms:

After the birth, the child is kept indoors for seven days; it is then held to have survived seven dangers and is worthy to be called a person. If it dies before the 8th day, it is considered as having never been born and thus no name. The “Kpodziemo” or “going out ceremony” at which the child is named takes place on the 8th day after birth.

Rather than following this age-long tradition, the lure of materialism blinds Efua and Araba into moving the outdoor ceremony back three days to coincide with the payday so as to collect the fattest droppings. An outdoor ceremony intended to welcome a harmless child has been elevated into an inflated feast to which the wealthiest acquaintances are invited. This is no doubt a perfidious act against tradition by both women which on a wider scale translates into a woeful betrayal and neglect of the ancestors. Abdou (2015, p. 177) deplores the collapse of ancestral rites in the novel in these terms: “The society underestimates the ancestral rites for materialistic reasons, for Araba and her mother are eager to celebrate the baby’s birthday just after the payday when every worker get[s] his salary, without thinking about the child’s fate and the survival of their customs. The priority for them is to amass money.” Commenting on *Fragments* and referring to the awkward outdoor ceremony, Wright (1990, p. 33) writes:

The dying Naana, who serves as the novel’s ritual consciousness, both foreshadows and reviews events and issues reminders of the lost values of violated customs such as the outdoor ceremony. In her traditional

Akan belief the destinies of the newly born are intimately bound up with devotion to ancestors and care of elders: neglect of one end of the circular continuum of living, ancestors and the unborn interferes with events at the other. Filtered through her moral vision, the birth and outdooring of the child are enveloped by a ritualistic subtext which, in its allusions to Akan religious lore, evokes the gathering forces of an offended moral order and an atmosphere of mounting danger. The greedy acceleration of the ceremony leads to its ominous coincidence with the days of traditional harvest festivities, thus giving pay cycles priority over seasonal ones, money over the fruits of the earth. It becomes, as a result, a grim Earth festival, an inverted fertility rite presided over by Efua who, to show off an electric fan, kills by exposure the grandchild arriving by the festival.

Armah chooses to use Baako as a scapegoat as far as the awkward outdooring ceremony is concerned. He makes Naana, the ancestors' mouthpiece, think that Baako, the child's uncle, is more important than Kwesi, the child's father. She capitalises on the fact that fathers can be replaced while uncles remain to show Baako that he has failed in his duty to prevent them from destroying the child. This is a weakness of the novel insofar as Baako himself is powerless in that situation. Like Naana, Baako is a victim of both women and he cannot make them change their minds or recant their decision of making money out of the premature child. The society depicted in *Fragments* is greedy for money and other material objects, thus forcing Naana to complain in these terms: "Always and everywhere the same words that bring a sickness to the stomach of the listener. The world has changed... And they think it is enough to explain every new crime, to push a person to accept all" (p. 98).

Araba's child's outdooring ceremony as it is organised is absurd. Its absurdity lies in the fact that it is not held in the proper way. As a consequence, the child is killed by the very fan that his father has offered his mother at his premature birth. Naana's insinuation that they are destroying the child thus comes true. The destruction becomes complete at the right moment when Efua, the child's grandmother, is collecting money from the guests. Ironically, the child is killed by the very people who are supposed to protect him from danger because of their greed. Had the normal course of the ceremony been followed, the child would have certainly survived. The child has thus fled the horrors that are prepared for him in the world above to join the ancestors who are wronged by the child's mother and his grandmother. Ogede (1991, p. 533) rightly links the child's death to the abuse of tradition: "The death of Araba's child is attributed to [the] abuse of tradition; as the abuse of tradition provokes the anger of the ancestors, they withdraw their protection, thus allowing humans to become vulnerable to antagonist forces." The child's death is due to fact that his mother and his grandmother are blinded by materialism which is typically European to the detriment of their cultural values. Senam and Vincent (1932, p. 34) denounce such a behaviour in these terms:

It is because we have neglected the warning, advice and values of our forebears that we have been left rudderless and defenceless. Because this has been a wilful act, it is needless and inadmissible for us to bemoan our fate or indulge in self-pity. It is our vanity – typified by our empty pride in European ways which we do not quite understand and disregard for our ancestral voice – that had led to our misfortune.

Armah denounces the collapse of the old order or more accurately the collapse of African culture. That is what Abdou (2015, p. 176) calls "The disintegration of the black race". Armah denounces the Africans' lack of interest in their ancestors. Rather than pratising the cult of the ancestors and

perpetuating their cultural values, they are blinded by materialism which stems from their contact with the Western world. Naana lives out her last days in such ridicule, a lone voice representing the interest of the ancestors in a changed world that hardly pays them any homage. She plays the part of a seer, or chorus commenting on the general disease of society, and the particular tragedy about to befall her family. Naana foretells the death of Araba's baby and also warns Baako of his own imminent tragedy, but both Baako and Naana were too helpless to alter the course of events. All her warnings go unheeded, but her love, anxiety and prayers are sources of affection for Baako in contrast to the selfish and greedy machinations of his mother and sister. Naana forms the link between the past, the present and the future in the novel – and she completes the cycle of birth, death and regeneration. Araba's new born child falls victim to the materialistic schemes of the family concerned with immediate present only. Expressing her despair, Naana declares:

I was powerless before the knowledge that I had come upon strangers worshipping something new and powerful beyond my understanding, which had made all the old wisdom small in people's minds and twisted all things natural to the service of some newly created god. They have lost all belief in the wisdom of those gone before, but what new power has made them forget that a child too soon exposed is bound to die? (p. 199)

Naana's powerlessness lies in the fact that money and Western goods have become the sole concern of her people to the detriment of their own traditional beliefs. They have completely forgotten about their ancestors whose wisdom they are supposed to heed and perpetuate because of their lust for luxury. Ogbeide (2011, pp. 65-66) lays an emphasis on the consequence of Efua and Araba's act due to their lack of respect for the ancestors:

The consequence of Efua and Araba's heedless urge to make instant wealth is the fatal outdoor ceremony of the latter's child. The child had been seen by both as an avenue to realize their dream of material fulfillment which Baako had earlier "denied" them. This is the reason for their hurrying of the outdoor ceremony of Araba's son even though it was not yet time and there are hints in Naana's lamentation which are informed by Akan traditional belief that the ancestors have been spurned by the pair of Efua and Araba in their action. The ancestral spirits soon respond. First, the spirits whose sacred day, Sunday, the day of the Aday's commemoration of ancestors is appropriated for the outdoor ceremony and to whom no libation is offered, take back into the underworld, the child who in Naana's view is still in their keeping.

Second the offended earth spirit for whom Korankye's drunken sacrifice of a ram will not suffice to undo the harm already done by the decision on the early outdoor ceremony are made by the poetic logic of events to demand the greater sacrifice of the child itself, a fitting punishment for those who abuse the earth's fertility at a time of the year when it is ritually renewed.

Armah's recourse to Akan religious mythology, according to Wright (1987, p. 184), is more importantly to show how the most "vital human values enshrined by those beliefs – the sacredness of human life, the graduation of growth by the laws of natural time processes – have been abandoned for the worship of trinkets of western technology." This is a kind of moral decadence of the African society which was morally a model to be followed in the past. This moral decadence forcibly leads to the cultural decadence of the African society. In the novel, for instance, the baby's mother and its grandmother have sacrificed it to the insatiable god of materialism of the West just as their greedy ancestors had sacrificed their children by selling them to Western slave dealers for the sake of the glittering paraphernalia of westernisation. Naana puts this in a clearer perspective:

[...] what new power has made them forget that a child too soon exposed is bound to die? [...].

The

baby was a sacrifice they killed to satisfy perhaps a new god they have found much like the one that the same long destruction of our people when the elders first [...] split their own seed and raised half against half, part selling, gaining, spending till the last of our men sells the last women to any passing white buyer and himself waits to be destroyed by the great haste to consume things we have taken no care nor trouble to produce. (p. 199)

Baako's warning and Naana's forbidding come true when the child dies during the outdoor ceremony. Naana analyses the problem more clearly and tries to posit it in the larger perspective. For her, the killing of the child is the result of their loss of faith in the "wisdom of those gone before" (p. 199). The abuse of rituals which results in the death of the child can be viewed in this larger historical perspective. The colonised mentality of Efua and Araba is built on distorted values of the Ghanaian society. *Fragments* is "a frank and fearless expose of the problems of post-colonial Africa" (Ogede, 1991, p. 531). The outdoor ceremony of the child is an extended metaphor in the sense that it forewarns the impending doom destined for sensitive individuals in the wake of spiritual mutation. It can be safely inferred that Armah wishes to uphold African traditions and manners. Owing to "the falling apart" of those traditions and manners, although the child is only five days old, he becomes an ancestor once he dies. That is what Naana means when she says: "The little one is gone; soon he will be the elder of his great-grandmother there" (p. 199). The child is a victim of the cultural clash prevailing in his society and which Naana desperately tries to stop. The quotation below sums up the situation:

Armah [...] develops, through Naana, the philosophy of self-accusation or auto-evaluation via a vision of regeneration. In Naana's lyrical language, the reader notes a certain fear of a menacing chaos born with the colonial clash of culture [...]. Naana's lyricism translates her consciousness; she seems to represent "the values of the old Africa being swept away under the influence of Western ideas." [...].

Through Baako's grandmother's lyric, Armah succeeds to point out [sic] the irresolvable problem of cultural clash between the Western values and the African ways of life. Naana's philosophy of cycle and continuity is expressive. (Abdou, 2015, p. 175)

Abdou implies that Armah has used the character of Naana to denounce the clash of culture resulting from the Africans' contact with white people through colonialism. In other words, Naana is the witness of the collapse of the values of the old Africa which are being swept away by Western values. She is trying her best to stop that clash of culture. For instance, her deeds prove that she is ready to fulfil her mission which is to fight the marginalisation of the cult of the ancestors as long as she is alive. Referring to the characters of Naana and Baako, Ennin and Nkansah (2016, pp. 74-75) write:

The irony of the situation is that elders like *Naana* are disregarded in this postcolonial era but when their predictions come to pass, they are seen as witches of destruction. *Naana* thus, represents the wisdom of a bygone era, and her presentation is symbolic of the society's loss of traditional values that enrich the life of the community and ensure the sustenance of a vibrant culture. Therefore, the writer uses her together with *Baako* to lament the destruction of a former healthier way of life and to castigate the present's extreme materialism that is detrimental to the society's development and growth.

Naana, though a member of Onipa household, has been pushed back in the familial activities. Her presence in the traditional outdoor ceremony is completely ignored. She is firmly rooted in the traditional modes of perception. However, she is socially isolated, unheeded and forcibly marginalised by the neocolonised members of the Ghanaian society who have been caught in the “gleam” of materialism – “gleam” meaning here “the glitter of materialism.” Naana is completely shattered because of violence in many forms which she feels could have been avoided. The novel begins and ends with the mythical narration of Naana, but her marginalisation in her family, as well as society, and her subsequent wish for death is symbolic of the loss of link between the present and the past. She is the last link with the old traditions and cultures, the link with the legends of the past and a mode of life almost on the brink of extinction. The traditions and values for which she lives are no longer revered. Through Naana’s desperate endeavour to perpetuate African civilisation, and more precisely the cult of the ancestors, Armah looks upon traditional religion as a direct remedy to the fast westernisation of modern Africa. He thus gives an impetus to African civilisation in *Fragments*.

Conclusion

This paper, titled “Literary Apprehension of the cult of the Ancestors in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Fragments*,” has firstly endeavoured to show, through the character of Naana, that old people are intermediaries between the living and the dead. It has secondly tried to demonstrate that the libation is an invocation of the ancestors for protection; and it has thirdly examined the fact that a premature child is a potential ancestor. Through what has been said so far, it is clear that the ancestors are very important in the society depicted in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Fragments*. They interfere with the daily lives of the living whom they protect. They are invoked in circumstances such as travelling, birth, death, etc. in African societies so that they should fulfil what is expected from them by the living. Without being superstitious, one may say that the ancestors continue living among the living although they are invisible. So, the dead are not dead in fact. Through Araba’s child’s death, the novelist addresses his readership the message that nobody can transgress African customs and traditions and leave unharmed.

Armah has used satire, irony, imagery, metaphor and mythology to convey his message. He has reached his goal by drawing the attention of his readership to the necessity of preventing the collapse of African customs and traditions by coming back to their origins rather than indulging in alien practices and vices. Although Armah presents a disintegrated ancestral way of life in *Fragments* due to the black people’s loss of their cultural values because of their contact with the Western world, everything is not lost yet.

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