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## **Revisiting the Strengths of Precolonial Africa in the Selected works of Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah and Elechi Amadi**

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### **Abstract**

This paper revisits the strengths of precolonial Africa in a set of works by three giants of African literature, namely Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah and Elechi Amadi. The problem of the study is related to the fact that precolonial Africa has always been portrayed in Eurocentric discourses negatively. The consequence of this latter is actually observable through the behaviors and thinking of contemporary Africans in Africa and in the diaspora. The objective of the study is therefore to deconstruct the Eurocentric portrayals of precolonial Africa by revisiting the strengths of precolonial Africa in the selected works of Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah and Elechi Amadi. The data of the study are collected, analyzed and interpreted within the theoretical context of deconstruction. As a matter of fact, the results of the study indicate that precolonial Africa had multiple strengths which permitted that continent to engender some of the greatest societies in terms of culture or civilization. That greatness was seen through the transmission of indigenous knowledge, the maintaining of cohesion and stability in the society and the capacity of mobility. At the end, the study confirms that precolonial Africa was a civilization before its invasion by Arabs and Europeans and Africans did not hear of culture or civilization for the first time from Europeans.

**Key-words:** Africa, civilization, culture, deconstruction, Eurocentric discourses.

### **Résumé**

Cet article revisite les forces de l'Afrique précoloniale dans un ensemble d'œuvres de trois géants de la littérature africaine, à savoir Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah et Elechi Amadi. La problématique de l'étude est liée au fait que l'Afrique précoloniale a toujours été dépeinte de manière négative dans les discours eurocentriques. La conséquence de ce dernier est effectivement observable à travers les comportements et la pensée des Africains contemporains en Afrique et dans la diaspora. L'objectif de l'étude est donc de déconstruire les représentations eurocentriques de l'Afrique précoloniale en revisitant les forces de l'Afrique précoloniale dans les œuvres choisies de Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah et Elechi Amadi. Les données de l'étude sont recueillies, analysées et interprétées dans le contexte théorique de la déconstruction. En effet, les résultats de l'étude indiquent que l'Afrique précoloniale possédait de multiples atouts qui ont permis à ce continent d'engendrer certaines des plus grandes sociétés en termes de culture ou de civilisation. Cette grandeur se voyait à travers la transmission des savoirs indigènes, le maintien de la cohésion et de la stabilité de la société et la capacité de mobilité. À la fin, l'étude confirme que l'Afrique précoloniale était une civilisation avant son invasion par les Arabes et les Européens et les Africains n'ont pas entendu parler de culture ou de civilisation pour la première fois de la part des Européens.

**Mots-clés :** Afrique, civilisation, culture, déconstruction, discours eurocentriques.

## Introduction

Since the beginning of humanity, African literature has not only been at the service of people but it has also been the cultural and historical data bank for Africans to record and preserve their culture and history. This is in fact confirmed by Traoré and Coulibaly (2019):

Africa, being known for its orality, has always been a source of several forms of literature since prehistory, antiquity and the colonial period. The forms of literature manifested themselves through various types of expressions and social manifestations. This means that African literature in general derives from society as one of the key ingredients of African culture or civilization.<sup>2</sup> ( p.150).

It is in this context that we have selected the works of authors such as Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah and Elechi Amadi because we believe that civilization reigns supreme in literature and literature is a salient component of civilization too. It entails that we can discover and learn civilization through literary works.

As the problems of this research, we have realized that Africa is a great and very old continent thanks to its history. It is regarded as the cradle of humanity. That greatness did not start with its encounter with Europe. Africans themselves devised some values, behaviors and ways of life to make their societies strong, stable, collective and everlasting for future generations many centuries before the advent of actual civilization in Europe. However, this truth is less known by several contemporary Africans living in Africa and in the diaspora. Another problem at stake is that many Africans and non-Africans have deliberately ignored this truth because they have worked to ensure the hegemonic prevalence of European version of history over what has actually happened. The consequences of all these have engendered a web of stereotypes regarding precolonial Africa. They have also *interpellated* the African or the black man into subjugation, making him a mentally and emotionally affected being before the white man and his civilization. However, the objective of this study seeks to demonstrate how African societies have survived until today thanks to the strengths they had had before Arab and European penetrations. It also explains that those strengths were so deeply rooted that no foreign domination and influence could totally undermine.

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<sup>2</sup> Original citation : « L'Afrique, étant connue pour son oralité, a toujours été source de plusieurs formes de littérature depuis la préhistoire, l'antiquité et la période coloniale. Les formes de littérature<sup>2</sup> se manifestèrent à travers divers types d'expressions et manifestations sociales. Cela signifie que la littérature africaine de façon générale dérive de la société en tant que l'un des éléments constitutifs de la culture ou de la civilisation africaine » (Traoré and Coulibaly, 2019, p.150).

We can classify those strengths into three categories: transmission of indigenous knowledge, maintaining the cohesion and stability of the society and the capacity of mobility. Some of those values were common to African societies during the three sub periods of the pre-colonial period, namely during Egyptian ruling, after Arab penetration and before Western colonization. Others were specific to particular societies during a determined time of the pre-colonial period. The sum total of this is done within the postcolonial theoretical framework. The use, of this theory to collect, analyze and interpret the data of the study, consists in deconstructing the Eurocentric versions of precolonial Africa. In other words, the use of this theory disrupts the hegemonic Eurocentric discourse on Africa by providing a counter-discourse to the foregoing. In order to attain the aforementioned objective, the study is divided into three sections. The first section accounts for the precolonial African education and knowledge transmission mechanisms. The second one deals with some indigenous strategies used by precolonial Africa to ensure social cohesion and stability. The last section explains the capacity of mobility of precolonial Africans in times of peace and conflicts as embedded in the selected texts.

## **1- Precolonial African Education and Knowledge Transmission Means**

Knowledge plays a great role in the progress of any society as we can see it today. Pre-colonial Africans had the same conception regarding the importance of knowledge. It was widespread and ruled all the levels of the society contrary to what we learn through the works of Joseph Conrad, David Hume and the like. In fact, knowledge highly contributed to the survival of pre-colonial African societies, especially ancient Egyptian and Igbo ones. Nothing can actually be done in society without specific knowledge. Education was seen as the means of conveying different types of knowledge in these societies. The latter implies that there were specific types of knowledge and specific means to grasp any of these types. That is why the means of educating people and acquiring knowledge were various. The use of any means depended on the situation or circumstance and its utility in reaching the objectives expected from that situation. In this way, knowledge was transmitted through writing and symbols, oral tradition, initiation, folktales, proverbs and daily behaviors.

### **1.1. Education through Writing and Symbols**

The transmission of knowledge was significantly important for pre-colonial Africans. Since the period of Egyptian ruling, teaching and learning had occupied a central place in African societies. That teaching and learning were not only oral but also written. Writing was born in Ancient Egypt with the invention of the hieroglyphs and spread to the other places in the world:

In this context it becomes pertinent to specify that since in the Ancient World, Africa, through the case of Kemet, had her own writing system

to record history, every day's activities and keep administrative records. Be it the Phoenicians, who were one of the earliest people to establish trading relations with Ancient Egypt, or the Greeks, they were all inspired or learned from ancient Egyptians before being able to come up with their own writing systems. (Coulibaly et al, 2018, p.95).

The quotation therefore sustains the African origin of writing. As Africa is the cradle of humanity, Egypt was also regarded as the cradle of knowledge. By this token, it was considered the wellspring of knowledge, especially the written one.

Philosophy was highly developed and scholars from around the world came to learn in Egypt. Consequently, Egyptians were regarded as philosophers and teachers of philosophers. One passage in *KMT: in the House of Life* confirms this: "I saw one passage in which he said the Egyptians were philosophers and teachers of philosophers" (p.50). In addition to philosophy, all the other types of knowledge were taught in Egypt. Scientific subjects such mathematics, physics, chemistry, geology, agriculture, architecture, astronomy, economy and many others were well documented and taught in ancient Egyptian universities. Subjects such as literature, history, geography, rhetoric, reading and writing were also documented and taught. As the wellspring and the cradle of knowledge, well-trained teachers existed in all those disciplines.

## **1.2. Education through Oral Tradition and Initiation**

The transmission of knowledge in the society and its perpetuation were important matters for pre-colonial Africans. To transmit something genuine and durable, specific people in the society were entrusted with that noble responsibility. They had to teach the rest of the society. They had the fate of the society in their hands. They were referred to as traditionalists, bards or "djelis", meaning blood in the Mandingo language as it is used by Ayi Kwei Armah in his book *KMT: in the House of Life*. Their role in the society was akin to the role of blood in the body. They existed nearly in all the pre-colonial African societies starting with the Egyptian society. With the penetration of Arabs into the African societies, their true role somehow changed with the influence of the latter. That influence started with the Egyptian society and was extended to the other African societies created later and invaded by the Arabs. It is of paramount importance to recall that before the contact with foreigners, mainly Arabs, which put local management upside down. The traditionalists, fully aware of the knowledge of the past and skilled in the way of transmitting it usually through speech, performed their role perfectly as the blood carries out its role in the body. They were regarded as the memory of the people. The role of this memory was to remove anything harmful from the society and to value things pulling the communities toward each other. They taught people the indispensable elements both negative and positive concerning their society. Besides they showed them what to do with those elements in order to make the society an enjoyable place to live in.

Before the time when Arabs came smashing into us, before the Europeans invaded us, the work of traditionalists was to look for the elements of chaos, gather them and burn them. That was the small part of the work. The large part was to stay constantly on the lookout for the elements of cohesion the way the healer looks for medicine, to gather them, nurture them, strengthen them, and to infuse their essence into society and strengthening it. (Armah, 2002, pp.194-195).

The transmission of knowledge through oral tradition existed in all the pre-colonial African societies. The means and the type of education sometimes varied from one society to another. In the Igbo society before the arrival of the British colonizers, oral tradition was granted much importance in the education of people. That education mainly focused on the acquisition of good information necessary to the development of the society. In that society, there were specific people in charge of that matter. For instance, the town-crier was in charge of informing the population in case of meeting or death. Once people heard the crier's voice, they immediately discerned what was going on. As a result, everyone got ready for what would come next.

In addition to the crier, the population was also given the right information during meetings through a special person called the spokesman. He spoke on behalf of the whole community and knew rightly what to say and what not to say because of his past and present knowledge of the society: "Ogbuefi Ezeugo was a powerful orator and was always chosen to speak on such occasions" (Achebe, p.8). That way of transmitting knowledge was effective to the extent that everybody was informed regularly and pleasantly about what happened or anything that was indispensable to the present and future of the society.

In pre-colonial Africa, transmitting knowledge through traditionalists as described above was not the only way of educating people. Initiations were also very important in African societies in the transformation of human beings into true people, learned, careful and mature, capable of playing a true role in the society. Initiation was a common practice to all the pre-colonial African societies starting with the Egyptian society. Practices of initiation were not the same in all the societies. Sometimes, differences existed between them depending on the societies, but with the same purpose of educating children. Evidence of initiation is provided in *Two Thousand Seasons*, stressing the importance of the practice before the arrival of Arabs in many pre-colonial African societies:

All this was before the time when we of our age began our initiations- for us a beautiful time, time of friendship, time of learning, when in the blindness of childhood we knew only of our own growing powers but of the weakening, the destruction of the power of our people we were completely ignorant. (...) We moved first to the skills of protection. Here almost all reached the beginnings of the fundi's mastery. The teachers told us before the dances of

recapitulation and rest: 'You are welcome to deepen yourselves here if it is in you to make yourselves experts in the arts of protection. Whatever your decision, go learn the skills taught by other teachers. If you come back we shall be glad to go forward with you in your deepening. May your going be good.' (Armah,1973, p.85).

Storytelling was one of the best ways of educating people and transmitting knowledge in pre-colonial Africa before and after foreigners' penetration into the continent. Through stories, children in their young age learn many values that they would need not only in their childhood but also in their adulthood and old age. Children learn the stories from old people including their own parents and any other old wise person in the society.

Sometimes stories were told by elderly people not to children but to other old people during conversation to make themselves understood. Thus, storytelling was a powerful means used to teach everybody in the society, both old and young, and at any time. In *Things Fall Apart*, Uchendu illustrates the foolishness of the people of Abame for killing the white man by telling the story of Mother Kite who once sent her daughter to bring food. In the story, Mother Kite asks her daughter to bring food. She goes and brings back a duckling. She asks her daughter about the reaction of the mother of the duckling. The latter says she does not react. Hence, Mother Kite asks her daughter to return the duckling because it is dangerous to act negatively against someone or something which does not react or say anything. This is implicitly and wisely conveyed as follows: "The Abame people killed the white man because they were foolish since the white man did not say anything. So they suffered near starvation because of their foolishness" (pp.98-99). This is actually an efficient way to teach and advise people through the use of stories. This means was used to educate both children and adults.

The use of proverbs was another very significant means of transmitting knowledge. During conversations, debates, meetings and works, proverbs were used to express an action, give a speech or convey a particular message without being rude. They were not used at random but depending on situations and circumstances. As they were commonly used, they were learned and mastered very easily. In *Things Fall Apart*, some examples of Igbo proverbs are provided: "If a child washed his hands, he could eat with kings" (p.6). This proverb simply means that at a younger age one can participate in the affairs of the society if he or she achieves great things following the customs of the land. It also indicates that the management of a nation is not the actions and decisions of elders or leaders only but the youth too, especially when they are prepared for. In the Igbo society, age was respected, but achievement was revered. The author, an Igbo man himself, uses this proverb to refer to Okonkwo who becomes prosperous at a younger age, so very early he becomes one of the prominent members of his community. "An old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb" (p.15). The underlying message of

this proverb is that one can never show full happiness if one's position is close to an unfortunate situation whenever the latter is evoked. As the conversation is about someone whose father was a failure in his lifetime, but whose spirit claims much sacrifice after his death, Okonkwo cannot laugh like the other people since his own father was a great failure in his lifetime too. "A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm" (p.47). This proverb shows that there is security in or nothing to fear from things performed on behalf of one's owner, protector or leader. It is used by Okonkwo himself to tell his friend Obierika who was speaking about the retributions from the Earth for his participation in the killing of Ikemefuna, that the latter cannot punish him because of that killing. For Okonkwo, the decision of killing the boy was from the Oracle, and the Oracle was only acting on behalf of the earth goddess, her god and the god of the whole community.

The use of proverbs was not limited to one particular pre-colonial African society but all. They varied from one society to another and from one period to another and from one situation to another. In any case, they permitted to give more importance to one's speech. For that reason, the use of proverbs was very much cherished by pre-colonial Africans during conversations and gatherings.

Beside proverbs, knowledge was transmitted to people through daily behaviors too. Children were warned to avoid certain practices daily. This allowed them to know what was good or bad before their adulthood and old age. In this way, knowledge was spread in the society. In the pre-colonial Igbo society, the implementation of this type of education was the concern of the members within the family if the situation required it. Outside the family, it became the matter of the whole community: "Children were warned not to whistle at night for fear of evil spirits. Dangerous animals became even more sinister and uncanny in the dark. A snake was never called by its name at night, because it would hear. It was called a string" ( p.7). This quote is an illustration of how certain behaviors were used to educate children and prepare them for their adulthood by condemning certain prohibited behaviors.

During certain activities children were given specific knowledge about what to do and what not to do. For instance, during eating, sitting, walking, drinking, sleeping or speaking certain actions and many manners were forbidden. In case children did not abide by those interdictions, they were immediately rebuked. For instance, in *Things Fall Apart*, while Okonkwo was eating, his daughters Obiageli and Ezinma waited for him to finish. He corrected the misbehavior of Ezinma whose way of sitting did not conform to that of Igbo women: "Sit like a woman!" Okonkwo shouted at her. Ezinma brought her two legs together and stretched them in front of her" ( p.32). As stated above even children could recall their parents if they noticed a difference between the deeds and the social rules set. As speaking was forbidden while eating in the Igbo society, Obiageli reminds her father Okonkwo of that rule because the latter speaks while eating: "Father, said Obiageli,

‘people should not talk when they are eating or pepper may go down the wrong way’ ( p.32). Africans were aware of the importance of knowledge in the development of their societies. To achieve that purpose, they devised diverse means to transmit the different types of knowledge they had for the well-being of their societies. Those means of transmission were various proving the creativity of pre-colonial Africans and their awareness of the importance of knowledge in the development of the society. Alongside the transmission of knowledge in the society, maintaining the cohesion and stability of their societies was dear to pre-colonial Africans.

## **2- Indigenous strategies to ensure Cohesion and Stability in Precolonial Africa**

Pre-colonial African societies had existed for a long time and resisted many pitfalls and adventures since the period of the ancient Egyptian ruling up to the period before Western colonization. This durability and resistance were due to the strengths of African societies during that period. Contrary to what is generally claimed by the detractors of African culture or civilization, to maintain cohesion and stability in the society, Africans devised and valorized specific values such as: solidarity between people, hospitality, defense of communal interests, search for consensus, respect of the customs and social norms established and respect for elders and the authority.

### **2.1. Solidarity between People**

Solidarity was one of the greatest values of pre-colonial African societies. The respect of that value allowed pre-colonial African people to address their concern for maintaining a united and stable society. The implementation of that value considerably reduced poverty, individualism and selfishness in the society. Through that value reciprocity became a reality. Everybody was given consideration and no one was left helpless. Solidarity also permitted the implementation of the proverb “United we are strong and divided we fail”. That concept of mutual help was shared at all the levels of the society. It existed between individuals in the society. In such a case any individual in need could seek help from any other person capable of helping him. In this way everyone could have a solution to his problem from any other individual who could help him.

Applied in all the pre-colonial African societies since the time of the Egyptian ruling, the Igbo society was not an exception. In *Things Fall Apart*, after clearing his farm Okonkwo needs seed-yams to sow but he hasn’t any since he did not inherit any single yam from his father. Sure of the existence of solidarity in his community, he goes to see a prosperous man in the village, named Nwakibie for help. The latter gives him satisfaction and he becomes very happy.

Okonkwo thanked him again and again and went home feeling happy. He knew that Nwakibie would not refuse him, but he had not expected he would be so generous. He had not hoped to get more than four hundred seeds. He

would now have to make a bigger farm. He hoped to get another four hundred yams from one of his father's friends at Isiuzo. (Achebe, 1958, p.16).

That feeling of solidarity existed between families. In the society if there was anything good or bad in any family, the members of all the other families would contribute physically, financially and morally. During the marriage of Obierika's daughter, all the community is involved, "All the three wives of Okonkwo contributed. They brought among other things coco-yams, salt, smoked fish, plantains and palm-oil" (p.77). Furthermore, solidarity existed between relatives in the society. Any close or distant parent was supplied with help in case of misfortune. This could be in one's own society or another one. In Achebe's novel, when Ogbuefi Udo's wife is killed in Mbaino, all the Umuofians show their solidarity, "After receiving as compensation for the murder of a young lad and a virgin, it is unanimously decided that the girl goes to replace the murdered wife" (p. 9). When Okonkwo leaves his fatherland Umuofia for his motherland Mbanta, he is well welcomed by his mother's parents: "He is later given a plot of land where to build his compound, two pieces of land on which to farm during the planting season and a lot of seed-yams to plant his farm" ( p.91).

## **2.2. Hospitality and the prioritization of Communal Interests**

Beyond solidarity, other values insured the cohesion and stability of pre-colonial African societies. Among them, we have hospitality. Hospitality was an intrinsic value of pre-colonial Africans before the arrival of the first foreigners, that is the Arabs. Before that time Africans were open and hospitable people, always ready to welcome, help, give and share with any foreigner. The saying, "stranger is king" and "Make yourself at home" was in full practice. It was due to that hospitality that foreigners, first the Arabs later the Europeans were well received in Africa. Before their arrival, Africans did not know how to reject or harm foreigners. They also did not know that a foreigner could think of doing them wrong. That idea of hospitality is well illustrated in *Two Thousand Seasons*:

We were not always outcasts from ourselves. In that fertile time before far-listening Anoa made her vatic utterance we were a refuge on this earth for those – hau, too many- bitten hard among their own. In our generosity they found their denied sustenance. A ruinous openness we had, for those who came as beggars turned snakes after feeding. The suspicious among us had pronounced fears incomprehensible to our spirit then, words generosity failed to understand. (Armah, 1973, p.2).

Another strength which made pre-colonial African societies cohesive and stable was the sense of communal interests. Selfishness was regarded as a very bad and destructive behavior in pre-colonial Africa. The defense of the collective interest was the priority of all the individuals. Personal interest was left in the background and priority was given to the collective one although it was sometimes very difficult. In this way,

individualism was almost inexistent in the societies. This renunciation of individual interest made those people powerful and allowed them to overcome so many arduous circumstances. That defense of communal interest existed in all the pre-colonial African societies. In the Igbo society, the sense of communal interest was granted much value. In some situations, it was a sacrifice very difficult to bear, but people accepted it since the interest of the community was above that of the individual and the family.

In the context of intertextuality, that sense of communal interest is also illustrated in *The Great Ponds*. As there is a conflict over the ownership of the pond of Wagaba, the two warring villages meet at Isiali to determine the right owner. After much discussion and many solutions proposed, the final solution found to the conflict is to let the gods decide, which means to swear by a specific powerful god. Having been chosen by Aliakoro to swear on behalf of his village Chiolu, Olumba accepts the sacrifice to swear by Ogbunabali to defend his village: "I swear by Ogbunabali the god of the night that the Pond of Wagaba belongs to Chiolu : 'If this is not true let me die within six months'; 'if true let me live and prosper' ".<sup>3</sup> This example shows that every member of the community was devoted to its cause and even ready to suffer or die for it. The interest of a single individual was seen as nothing compared to that of the whole community. That is why Olumba accepts to risk his life in order to defend the interest of his community.

### **2.3. African Sense of Democracy and the Search for Consensus**

There were many values which made pre-colonial Africa strong. The presence of democracy played its role in the maintaining of that cohesive and stable society. Putting the whole society in the center of any decision was something very important in pre-colonial African societies. The collective decision prevailed in any action to be taken in the interest of the community. No leader or chief could take any unilateral decision on behalf of the society. Collective consultation or gathering was done before taking any decision concerning the society. An illustration of this is given in *Things Fall Apart*: "Then the crier gave his message, at the end of it beat his instrument again. And this was the message. Every man of Umuofia was asked to gather at the market-place tomorrow morning" (p.7). To avoid division between kinsmen, the search for consensus was privileged. More importantly the collective decision agreed on was generally abided by everyone or carried out as it was decided. The decision to send Okonkwo as an emissary to Mbaino is made by all. Even though there were no ballot system and no total involvement of all members of the society in this decision-making, the free debate and freedom of speech were similar to those in modern democracies.

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<sup>3</sup>. Elechi Amadi (1969). *The Great Ponds*. London: Heinemann, pp.85-86.

## 2.4. African Sense of Respect for Customs and Social Norms

The respect of the customs or social norms established was an important value which contributed to maintain pre-colonial African societies united and stable. No one was above the law. Everybody tried to respect the conventions of the society. In case of violation, the culprit was impelled to pay reparation. In case of refusal, the culprit could undergo many harmful consequences. That value existed in all the pre-colonial African societies. In the pre-colonial Igbo society, it was strictly observed. For example, when Okonkwo breaks the Week of Peace by beating his youngest wife because she went to plait her hair and did not return home early to cook the afternoon meal, he is punished, as is the custom by Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess, Ali, "To appease the goddess, he brings to her shrine one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries" (pp.21-22).

Respect in general was a much advocated quality in pre-colonial African societies. Respect existed at all the levels of the society, through all the generations. The respect for elders was a requirement. According to the Igbo cultural conception of respect, it is more important than material acquisition since it could provide what money, gold, diamond and physical force could not. In the Igbo society as in the other pre-colonial African societies, respect was much valued. To make a start in life Okonkwo needs help as he did not inherit anything from his father. To get this help from a prosperous man in the village, he needs to show respect first and foremost. Thus, he goes to see Nwakibie a prosperous man in the village. Before asking for help he shows Nwakibie respect by bringing him a pot of palm-wine and a cock. He also addresses him by calling him father before using a wonderful saying to pay tribute to the greatness of the man.

Respect was even observed in the leadership of the community. In pre-colonial African societies, leaders were generally old men or titled men. As old age is synonymous with wisdom, leaders always put that wisdom in the service of the younger generation in special circumstances. Because of the respect for elders, the latter followed the recommendations of the former since they strongly believed in the saying: "The mother hen never gives something harmful to its chicks".

The African sense of respect is also foregrounded in *The Great Ponds* by Elechi Amadi. For instance, when Chiolu and Aliakoro were discussing the ransom of two prisoners, many people became furious. Some brought with them some machetes as weapons. To appease people, the leaders of the two villages who were elderly men use their wisdom. Because of the respect for these elderly people, the mob accepted to give up the fight. Here is the speech delivered by Eze Diali, the leader of Chiolu:

Listen everybody and leave your machetes alone. There is nothing to be gained by fighting. We are for a peaceful settlement. If we don't agree today, we can always arrange another meeting. (...) Wago and Olumba you are both

men of valour. But valour that is not tempered with wisdom is useless and even dangerous. In a situation like this, fighting does not solve anything. Pepper can never be one of the ingredients of a soothing balm. (Amadi, 1969, p.24).

Within the family, respect was permanent. It existed between children, fathers, and mothers. Among wives in the same family respect was permanent. The eldest wife was respected by the other wives. For instance, in Nwakibi's family, his first wife Anasi is granted respect by the other wives by letting her drink first the palm-wine Okonkwo brought: "Anasi was the first wife and the others could not drink before her, and so they stood waiting" (p.14). Between fathers and children, respect was precious. Respect was akin to obedience. Children obeyed their fathers in anything concerning their present and future. Children trusted so much their parents that they did not question their decisions. That is why Okonkwo's daughter, Ezinma refuses all the marriage proposals made to her in Mbanta during their exile because her father called her one day and said to her that he would be happy if she married in Umuofia when they returned.

That respect for elders was not limited to the living. Dead people were not forgotten. They had their share in that respect. They were showed respect in many occasions through different actions and things. For instance, during the farewell feast Okonkwo organizes to thank people of his motherland Mbanta, his uncle Uchendu, after thanking and blessing Okonkwo for his action, breaks the kola nut. Before giving the kola nuts to his kinsmen to eat, he throws one lobe on the ground. This lobe thrown on the ground is the share of the ancestors who must take part in what is going on. This simply symbolizes the gratitude and great respect the living have for the dead: "He then broke the kola nut and threw one of the lobes on the ground for ancestors" (p.117).

Pre-colonial Africans were open-minded people. The consideration of the society as one entity and the stability of that entity were things dear to them. To reach that purpose they advocated many values and qualities in their societies. Each of those values was very useful. To make their societies stronger, pre-colonial Africans developed another quality. That quality was the ability to move easily from one place to another.

### **3- Capacity of Mobility**

Pre-colonial African societies had many strengths. Those strengths were not limited only to the transmission of indigenous knowledge and maintaining a cohesive and stable society. In addition to these great strengths, they had another quality not less important. That quality was the capacity of mobility, the ability to move from one place to another easily in case of danger, need or out of pleasure. The ability to move in case of danger or need is a precious quality and pre-colonial African people had it. Among those motions

undertaken by Africans we can quote voluntary motions before the coming of foreigners, and timely mobility during the seven migrations from Egypt to the other places.

In pre-colonial African history, movement was something extremely important. People undertook different movements for different reasons. Most of the time those movements from one place to another were not from their own initiatives. They were sometimes under pressure. This was mainly the case after the penetration of foreigners, Arabs first, thereafter Europeans. However, before the coming of those foreigners, Africans travelled, but not under pressure. They were people who habitually travelled. Their motions were voluntary, purposeful, peaceful and pleasurable. An evidence of this is provided in *Two Thousand Seasons*:

It is not that we had not travelled before. We are not a stagnant people, hating motion. But in that fertile time before Anoa's utterance even our longer journeys were absorbed in a lasting evenness. From that long, forgetful peace our exile has been harsh and steep has been our descent. (Armah, 1973, p.3).

That free motion from one place to another was not peculiar to one pre-colonial African society but all. In the Igbo society, people undertook free movement from one village to another to make feast: "Sometimes, their stay could be long but always peaceful and pleasurable. Sometimes another village would ask Unoka's band and their dancing egwugwu to come and stay with them and their tunes. They would go to such hosts for as long as three or four markets, making music and feasting" (Achebe, p.4). Sometimes, those free movements were carried out within the framework of friendship, village meetings and ancestral feasts.

Leaving one's place to flee danger was not something difficult for Africans. They had the capacity to reach new destinations and continue their lifetimes. Many pre-colonial African societies were the fruits of the migrations of the very first Africans, especially the Ancient Egyptians. Many people from Ancient Egypt were compelled to migrate for different reasons and at different moments. Any time their existence was threatened in their areas, those people immediately took the decision to join other places more peaceful. As people physically and mentally capable, they always managed to reach the new destinations envisaged. In that way, their race survived and new societies were created. In total seven great movements were undertaken by the persecuted Ancient Egyptians to join new places. Those seven movements and their reasons are described by Armah in his book *KMT: in the House of Life*.

The first movement was due to the fact that the rulers started accepting as entertainment daughters of the desert nomads brought in by their own fathers and sometimes husbands as gifts in exchange for favors to stay among us. That situation brought fear upon the mothers of the land because it completely

broke the established rule of life. Fearing the consequences of such a situation, some people left. (...)

The seventh movement was the journey of the companionship of scribes. Their writings were forbidden, and those caught reading them were put to death. (2002, pp.196-197).

People in those migrations did not go to the same place. They followed different directions in the continents. This is also a proof of their capacity of mobility. An illustration of this is provided in *KMT: in the House of Life*. "Listening to the netchers of change some ancestors traveled out of the greenness of origins. Some went even farther south, some turned right and headed west. Some went eastward, heading left. Those who followed the river northward came into the valley of this Hapi, listening to the wisdom of the waters" (p.229). Mobility is not something new for Africans today. It is an integral part of their history. In the pre-colonial period for different reasons, African people undertook some journeys. Contrary to other people like Arabs and Europeans who migrated to Africa for economic and religious reasons, Africans did not go to any continent to practice slavery and impose on it their religious beliefs. Most of their migrations were internal ones. This does mean that they did not move to other continents. Some pre-colonial Africans went to America and Asia for instance, but with objectives completely different from those of Arabs and Europeans in the African continent.

## **Conclusion**

All in all, Africa is a great continent. That greatness did not start with the arrival of foreigners such as Arabs and Europeans. On the contrary Africa's greatness was threatened by them with their ideologies, religion and economic ambitions. The greatness of pre-colonial Africans is seen in their ability to have knowledge and find the means and methods of transmitting it to everybody; the creation of some specific values which made the society an enjoyable, collective and stable place to live; and the capacity of moving from one place to another to flee danger or for pleasure. Those strengths actually deconstruct the fallacies put forward by some Western people to justify certain malpractices carried out in Africa such as slavery, imposition of new religions and colonization. Certainly pre-colonial African societies, like any human civilization, had some imperfections, but they neither needed nor called Arabs and Europeans for any solutions or help to improve their ways of living because they had been an actual civilization.

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