

Emerging Perspectives on Alobwed'Epie

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Edited by

Sarah Anyang Agbor,
Manyaka Toko Djockoua
and Stephen Ambe Mforteh

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PREFACE

Although his name is relatively “new” in contemporary postcolonial literature, Alobwed’Epie is arguably one of Cameroon’s most prolific writers of the twenty-first century. Controversial in his portrayal of the political and sociocultural reality of his country, the writer has been loved and hated, praised and cursed, perhaps because of the bluntness with which he exposes some of the hidden realities of his country. Alobwed’Epie has written insightful fiction although he has so far been in the shadows – when compared to his other contemporaries like Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Chinua Achebe and Buchi Emecheta – to name just these few. The aim of this collection of essays is therefore to place the author’s fiction in the competitive arena of African literature and to increase his visibility in the broader and challenging realm of postcolonial literature.

Alobwed’Epie’s main preoccupations seem to be the failure of post-independence leadership in most African countries, and specifically in Cameroon, and the preservation of African (Cameroonian) cultural values that are threatened by globalization – though he does not in any way suggest, as most of the articles argue, that all these cultural values are good. Beyond these “localized” concerns, the comparative approach adopted by most of the contributors to this collection shows the universality of Alobwed’Epie’s oeuvre. Gender issues, ethnicity, political instability, greed, dictatorship, and poverty, though represented in the context of an African country, are themes that find an echo in many national literatures.

Like most postcolonial African writers, Alobwed’Epie appropriates the English language by giving it local color much like Chinua Achebe. The papers on language thus complement those on literature to project the postcolonial dimension of the writer’s work. By appropriating the English language to deal with both local and universal issues, Alobwed’Epie engages in a new postcolonial discourse; a discourse that has moved beyond the obsession with the colonial encounter and its consequences to probe into the postcolonial nation itself. It examines the pervasive post-independence internal colonialism that corrodes postcolonial polities. In other words, instead of “writing back to the Metropolis,” Alobwed’Epie writes “home” to unveil the unstated reality of the “iron curtain” that divides the ruling-cum-bourgeois class and the poor masses.

Emerging Perspectives on Alobwed'Epie, a pioneer work on Alobwed'Epie's poetry and fiction, thus carves a niche for the author as a writer of postcolonial literature. It offers the reader and the critic the opportunity to examine the author's oeuvre from multiple perspectives. His Cameroonization of the English language falls within the framework of Achebe's school with regards to the debate on the ability of the colonizer's language to express the realities of the postcolonial polities.

Finally, feminists who find in postcolonial discourse a befitting arena for the exposure of women's issues and a useful tool in addressing and redressing cultural values that place the woman in a marginal position may find in Alobwed'Epie an anti-feminist, as he seems to find nothing wrong with some cultural values that enslave the woman. In other words, although he empowers his female protagonists, Alobwed'Epie seems to promote African patriarchal cultural values. This collection therefore approaches the question of the postcolonial woman from different angles: linguistic, socio-historical and cultural.

Sarah Anyang Agbor
Manyaka Toko Djockoua
Stephen Mforteh

INTRODUCTION

This book shows the important contribution of Alobwed'Epie's works to contemporary literary art and sociolinguistic studies in Cameroon. It knits together the different essays which use comparative and multidisciplinary approaches to highlight the universal dimension of the author's oeuvre.

In her essay, Manyaka T. Djockoua compares Alobwed'Epie's *The Lady with a Beard* to Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* to show that both authors' acquaintance with African rituals shaped their vision of life in similar ways. Like many African writers, they consider rituals and their correct performance as the essence of life. Thus both texts blend in analogous ways, naturalistic determinism, existentialist nihilism, and necessity of choice. Although natural and social environments are active agents in their protagonists' dramas, they do not deprive them of choice. This article therefore drives to the conclusion that the choices that men and women make, and the correct technique they use to exercise these choices, enable them to assert their being and monitor their destiny in the face of overwhelming odds.

Sarah Anyang Agbor studies some poems of Alobwed'Epie's *Crying in Hiccoughs* to establish the relationship between memory, national consciousness and the constructions of history. She argues that the manipulation of memory and history shapes and reshapes personal and national identity and influences the dominant societal ideology, as well as the authorial ideology. The process of remembering thus impacts on national consciousness in African, and specifically Cameroonian, contemporary reality. Alobwed'Epie has been influenced by the historical, cultural, social, economic and political realities of his society, his major source of inspiration. His poetry can therefore be termed "national literature" even if it tackles issues that are recurrent in many postcolonial nations.

Using the theory of dissipation to study Alobwed'Epie's *The Lady with the Sting*, Stephen Mforteh reiterates the author's nationalist feeling that Anyang earlier mentioned in her article. The heroine of the novel stands for West Cameroon that the author knows so well. Like West Cameroon, Ntube is wooed, conquered, and destroyed by Nsahbinla. Nsahbinla is the legendary foreigner, who symbolizes globalization and civilization via the

unification of the Bamenda people and the coastal people on the one hand, and West Cameroon and East Cameroon on the other hand. None of Alobwed'Epie's works deplores this tactful destruction of traditional values as *The Lady with the Sting*. The use of language is most typical of the author who successfully juxtaposes contradictory linguistic signals.

Mforteh clearly and convincingly shows how the dissipating traditional set up is a bad signal for the unsophisticated people of Ngombuku who represent the people of erstwhile Southern Cameroons/West Cameroon. Alobwed'Epie thus castigates the intruders, or agents of dissipation, who ruined traditional values.

Closely linked to dissipation is the effect of the curse on the protagonists and the society they represent. Ernest Veyu sees the Ngombuku context influenced by Christianity (the invader) and traditional religions that were practiced before. Everyone lives in awe of Christian or traditional curses that control human relationships.

The quest for an Anglophone identity is the focus of Mbuh's critical paper that examines Fonlon's classicism in two of Alobwed'Epie's novels, namely *The Death Certificate* and *The Day God Blinked*. Alobwed'Epie, the sociolinguist and creative writer, combines his Mother Tongue, Pidgin English, New Englishes, and of course, British English. The cardinal role of Pidgin English as a tool for bridging cultures in Cameroon, the proverbial tower of Babel, Mforteh (2006) clearly shows. Noteworthy is the expression, "Jam pass die" which is variously translated and interpreted as follows:

- 1 Hunger is worse than death
- 2 To be in need is worse than death
- 3 It is better to die than be in need (jam) or to be a beggar

Mbuh succeeds in highlighting Alobwed'Epie's critical stance on politics and on his society in *The Death Certificate*. Mbuh argues that the work reveals new empires and hegemonies built at political, social, and intellectual levels. As far as literary canons are concerned, Mbuh points out that Alobwed'Epie has adopted neither Fonlon's classicism nor Bate Besong's populism and radicalism as evidenced by his linguistic signals.

Pangmeshi, like Mbuh, views Alobwed'Epie's fiction as representative of his native Ngombuku community, where women are not supposed to transcend certain social norms. In *The Lady with a Beard*, because Emade challenges some of the cultural and patriarchal norms which inhibit a woman's potential, she is derogatively attributed a beard, a symbol of manhood. In Pangmeshi's view, Alobwed'Epie's novel and Nkemngong's

The Widow's Might give a cynical portrayal of the female gender. Alobwed'Epie's heroine, Emade, may be considered a failure, but she represents a society's budding attempt to transform itself.

Blossom Fondo sees *The Death Certificate* as a vivid picture of the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial era. The stench and dirt (symptoms of death), the building of hegemonies and the morbid attempts to conceal misappropriated public funds are eloquent testimony to the new crop of leaders who have replaced the colonialist. Fondo's use of the expression, "dystopian world" predicts doom. She sees Ewawa, the fictional Cameroon, and Dunde, its capital, on the verge of collapse. Consequently, the heroes in the novel must die for a social transformation to take place. This transformation presages the change of African societies in general, and that of Cameroonian society in particular. Alobwed'Epie's interest in the value of historical facts is unquestionably one of his greatest assets. No doubt in their papers, Tarka Fai, Mforteh, and Mbuh see *The Death Certificate* as a fictional representation of Cameroon in the postcolonial era. Tarka Fai uses postcolonial theory and New Historicism to establish a subtle parody of contemporary Cameroon – a prosperous country with enormous potential, and credulous and receptive indigenes that are suddenly overwhelmed by the foreigner syndrome. The carefully selected linguistic signals successfully drive home the point. The social ills highlighted are: selfishness, greed, fraud, corruption, mafia tendencies, tribalism and nepotism, among others. Tarka, like most critics of Alobwed'Epie, sees the latter dreaming of a situation where the society depicted in his works could be metamorphosed through the "annihilation of the poison that has already pigmented the entire body politic." Without this kind of change, nationhood (see Anyang, 2010), which ought to bring the nationals closer through a sense of belonging, will never be attained. The fictional Ewawa, identified as Cameroon, is still to come to terms with herself in the postcolonial era, and begin to chart a way forward when certain ills, partly created by the colonialist, have been defaced. Citing Fanon, F. (2006), Tarka subtly re-echoes what other writers have evoked, that nationhood, national consciousness, national unity, and the feeling of oneness are not evident. Rather, the reverse is true: ethnicity/the tribe takes precedence over all. From a practical perspective, most of the political parties in Cameroon have a tribal inclination.

Besides the political and historical elements that prominently feature in Alobwed'Epie's works, is his concern for gender issues. This has been carefully captured by Mutia in her paper that compares Alobwed'Epie's *The Lady with the Sting* and Hemingway's *The Sun also Rises*. Mary Ntube, as well as Lady Brett Ashley, both battle a male dominated society.

Although they are stigmatized, they remain focused on their goals. These two heroines reflect not just the evolution of human thought, but also that of the communities where they live. Divorce in the two works is very symbolic: it is not just the separation of two people, but it is a radical departure from the old to the new. It is the fact of initiating positive change.

Unlike Mutia, George Ewane posits that in Alobwed'Epie's novels, the change initiated by rebellious female characters disrupts the harmony that prevails in the traditional social set up where laws and traditions must be scrupulously respected. Consequently, Emade's failure to change her society's inhibiting traditions is perceived as the author's will to restore Dynamic Organicism.

Finally, Anyang Agbor's interview with Alobwed'Epie provides fascinating insights into the writer's poetry and prose fiction.

Sarah Anyang Agbor,
Manyaka Toko Djockoua,
Stephen Mforteh.

CHAPTER ONE

NATURALISM, RITUAL, TECHNIQUE, AND BEING IN THE POSTMODERN NOVEL:

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S *THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA* AND ALOBWED'EPİE'S *THE LADY WITH A BEARD*

MANYAKA TOKO DJOCKOUA

Human beings have always tussled with their natural and social environments. Although science and technology have relieved them of drudgery and prolonged their life expectancy, twenty-first century men and women are still subjected to numerous threats and challenges. In such a context, today more than yesterday, postmodern fiction resonates with naturalistic determinism, as the question of man's survival and existence – an age-old issue – still remains one of the major concerns of postmodern writers. Consequently, this chapter addresses one of the key problems of the twenty-first century by probing into Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) and Alobwed'Epİe's *The Lady with a Beard* (2005) to explain the role of rituals and correct technique in man's existence and essence. Hemingway's and Alobwed'Epİe's acquaintance with African rituals, their similar perceptions and explanations of ritual and technique, and their blend of these elements to man's existential problem make such a comparative study possible.

This chapter therefore seeks to answer two major questions: Why have these two postmodern writers adopted a naturalistic stance in their novels? What is the significance of their blend of rituals, technique and being? This essay thus purports that Hemingway and Alobwed'Epİe reconcile ritual, technique and being in analogous ways because they both view life

as a ritual whose performance very much depends on the performer's nimbleness. In other words, both writers contend that correct technique is the best means through which men and women successfully confront the human condition by giving meaning to their life and existence.

In "John Steinbeck: A Usable Concept of Naturalism," Warren French quotes Donald Pizer who defines the naturalistic novel thus:

The naturalistic novel usually contains two tensions or contradictions [...], and the two in conjunction comprise both an interpretation of experience and a particular aesthetic recreation of experience. In other words, the two constitute the theme and form of the naturalistic novel. The first tension is that between subject matter of the naturalistic novel and the concept of man which emerges from this subject matter. The naturalist populates his novel primarily from the lower middle class or lower class. His characters are the poor, the uneducated, the unsophisticated.... The second tension involves the theme of the naturalistic novel. The naturalist often describes his characters as though they are conditioned and controlled by environment, heredity, instinct or chance. But he also suggests a compensating humanistic value in his characters or their fates which affirms the significance of the individual and of his life. (Bloom 65-66)¹

My analysis of *The Old Man and the Sea* and *The Lady with a Beard* will consider the two tensions above-cited. It will show that the characters in the texts are people from the lower middle class and lower class who are controlled by their natural and social environments. However, these characters are endowed with a compensating human value which affirms the significance of their lives.

The other concepts which need to be defined are ritual, technique and being. Rituals are a series of actions compulsively performed under certain circumstances, the non-performance of which results in tension and anxiety (OED). This definition echoes Ossie Oneke's contention, which John Nkemngong Nkengasong quotes thus: "[r]itual provides information, reduces anxiety by making people know that what has been, has been affected or will be fulfilled...Rituals bring a certain reality into being" (*Language, Literature and Identity* 74). So defined, rituals become repetitive actions which, when strictly linked to a people's culture or lifestyle, have to be performed in one way or the other to curb tension and anxiety. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, fishing is more than an economic activity. It is a ritual that gives meaning to the Cuban fishermen's lives in the same way the naming ceremony and the blackening of the tomb do in *The Lady with a Beard*.

As for technique, Joseph Beaver gives a three-dimensional meaning of the word: It is a way of performing some job properly; correct technique is

the performing of an action in measured time, slower than one is capable of performing it [...] Technique is something one learns from a teacher (*College English* 326). The meaning of “being,” used in my analysis derives from Heidegger’s Dasein (“Sein-da, being there”) which, as Horton and Edwards explain, means “the mode of existence of the human being.” According to Martin Heidegger, “man is to be considered always as a being-in-the-world...The world is not merely a place where one finds oneself, but it is constitutive of the very nature of one’s being.” Heidegger’s conception of objects in the world as tools, the means by which man accomplishes “his projects” in life leads to the conclusion that “man creates his essence in the ways in which he uses tools in time, in the realization of his possibilities as a being-in-the-world (Dasein) (Horton and Edwards 488-89). Likewise, in *L’Existentialisme, est un humanisme*, Jean-Paul Sartre argues that “life has no a priori meaning ... and because this is so, it is incumbent on men and women to give it meaning. Humans create values and their choices determine meaning” (89) (quoted in Ben Stoltzfus 216)². Being therefore includes man’s/woman’s essence, existence and his/her relationship to the world.

Although my paper is informed by many critical essays which have been written on the two novels after their publications, it diverges from the former studies, as it compares the two works, laying emphasis on their authors’ similar use of rituals and technique as a means to combine naturalism and existentialism. The first section of my paper will therefore analyze the two texts as naturalistic writings, while the second section attempts to give the significance of the two writers’ blend of ritual, technique and being.

***The Old Man and the Sea and The Lady with a Beard* as naturalistic novels**

The Old Man and the Sea and *The Lady with a Beard* are naturalistic texts which encompass the characteristics of the naturalistic novel defined by Donald Pizer in *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (1984). Since its publication in 1952, a good number of critical essays have been written on Hemingway’s book, but I will mention just a few of those which are in one way or another related to my analysis. Joseph Beaver’s article focuses on technique and action in *The Old Man and the Sea* (1953), Leo Gurko’s analysis (1955) examines the relationship between the great chain of being and heroism in the novel. Carlos Baker’s biography of the author (1969) dwells on the publication of the book, its reception by the public, its success, and its author’s reluctance

to consider the novel a naturalistic novel. In “Cultural Imperialism, Afro-Cuban Religion, and Santiago’s Failure in Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*,” Philip Melling holds that although the novel is set in the Gulf Stream, Santiago, the old Cuban fisherman worships American cultural values and not his Cuban culture. This American cultural imperialism, Melling posits, is fostered by radio programs, magazines and newspapers. As one can notice, all these aforementioned works do not look at Hemingway’s work as a naturalistic writing, yet this section of my essay demonstrates that *The Old Man and the Sea* embeds many characteristics of the naturalistic novel.

Hemingway’s novelette is about Santiago, an old Cuban fisherman who, after spending eighty-four days without catching a fish, ventures alone in a skiff very far out to sea. After a harsh struggle, he catches a big marlin which is later attacked and eaten by sharks. Despite the old man’s efforts to kill the sharks to protect his marlin, he reaches the shore with nothing of the fish but a big skeleton. At the commencement of the novel, the reader foreshadows Santiago’s failure: His “sail was patched with flour sacks and, furled, it looked like the flag of permanent defeat” (9). The sail is a premonitory sign of Santiago’s failure which is brought on by his ill luck, his old age and physical appearance. Santiago is old, thin and gaunt. He has deep wrinkles in the back of his neck. His cheeks bear the blotches of skin cancer and his hands have deep-creased scars. Everything about the fisherman is old except his eyes (9-10). The huge indifferent sea where the old man tries to combat his ill luck, his frailty and solitariness make him fall prey to the combined actions of the marlin and the cruel sharks. Right from the start of the fight, naturalistic determinism looms. Santiago’s life seems to be monitored by events that are beyond his control, as he himself acknowledges, he “violated [his] luck when [he] went too far outside” (116).

Being far away from the other fishermen and from Manolin – the boy who usually assists him during fishing – Santiago is subjected to the movements of the sea, the pulls of the marlin, and the attacks of the sharks. He thus recognizes his limits; he is too old to club sharks to death, especially with a cramped left hand. The Darwinian survival of the fittest thus regulates the cycle of sea life. The Mako shark is “a fish built to feed on all the fishes in the sea that were so fast and strong and well-armed that they had no other enemy” (101). This implies that even if the unusual big size of the marlin is an asset for the fish, it cannot save it from the destructive action of the Mako shark. Santiago thus comes to the pessimistic conclusion that “everything kills everything else in some way” (106). His statement is reminiscent of Jack London’s “Law of Life” which

shows that man is a helpless object tossed around by forces beyond his control.

It is not only the life of the sea that is part of the naturalistic cycle of killing. Santiago's life is also in sync with this cycle, as fishing is his sole economic activity. As a fisherman, he has to kill the marlin because he lives on it as the sharks do. He has not been given the opportunity to do any other work to earn a living. He "was born to be a fisherman as the fish was born to be a fish" (105). He cannot change the course of events; he can only adjust himself to it. Violence that characterizes the animal kingdom, of which man is a part, materializes through the verb "to kill" which occurs nine times on pages 105 and 106. Santiago's life and fate thus seem, in Pizer's words, "conditioned and controlled by environment and heredity." Fishing becomes a ritual that ensnares not only the old man, but also other fishermen, as their lives are wholly dependent on it: San Pedro and the great DiMaggio's father were fishermen (105). The activity is handed down from one generation to another even if DiMaggio deviates from this ritual pattern by becoming a great baseball player. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, human life is therefore determined by natural and social environments, heredity, and chance.

Like Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, Alobwed'Epie's *The Lady with a Beard* is a naturalistic novel. Its characters are "the poor, the uneducated, and the unsophisticated" (Bloom 65-66). Emade, the protagonist of the novel, is a village widow who, like many other men and women of her Bakossi community, falls victim of enslaving and unbending traditions which condition men's and women's behaviors and lives. Many Cameroonian critics have therefore studied this novel from feminist and cultural perspectives. In *The Cameroonian Novel of English Expression: An Introduction*, Shadrach Ambanasom observes that Alobwed'Epie adopts a critical stand against extreme feminists (206). Likewise, Ophelia Aniwa Abianji's "The Portrayal of the Widow in Alobwed'Epie's *The Lady with a Beard* and Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*," as well as Beatrice Dinga Mbonge's "The Politics of Culture in Alobwed'Epie's *The Lady with a Beard* and Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*," – two Master's dissertations written in 2007 – examine the stereotypical images and demeaning roles assigned to womenfolk in patriarchal societies. Sarah Anyang Agbor's article, "Sociocultural Analysis of Alobwed'Epie's *The Lady with a Beard* and John Nkemngong Nkengasong's *The Widow's Migh*" (2009) also takes a swipe at patriarchy and at the unbending Cameroonian traditions which impede women's self-fulfillment. Patriarchy and traditions are therefore the forces that control Emade's life and existence.

The cruel social environment induces Emade to believe that only the strong can survive in the Atieg and Muabag communities. As she informs her sister Ahone, “Atieg men and women take turns to wear me out. We are in the cauldron” (26). To survive in a cauldron, the protagonist develops a fighting spirit, defies the men and women of Atieg and earns the nickname “the Lady with a Beard.”

Like Santiago, Emade is conditioned by forces beyond her control: the animosity of the Atieg men and women, and her daughter’s (Ntube’s) fall when she is asked to take food to Ewang-Ename. This fall is the spark that kindles the hidden jealousy of the village womenfolk, while the daughter’s second fall in the Brook-of-the-Serpent, a marshy area mystified by the village people, makes Emade aware of the danger her daughter is exposed to. Falling in the brook has become common among the children of the village and the taboo has thus lost its significance, as many other children who have fallen in the brook have not offered sacrifice. Yet, Ntube’s fall in the brook is exploited by the greedy village people with the intention of getting food and drinks from Emade. The latter quickly understands that if she is strong, her daughter is a weak species that is vulnerable and can easily fall prey to the Atieg people’s traditions. She therefore reluctantly accepts to offer the sacrifice required by the greedy community:

Emade jumped at the answer. The Atieg people were at the service of their throats. And once more they were about to exploit her. They need food and drinks [...] ‘The serpent of the brook needs food, and I am the one to give it. I shall give it. Let them not say I did not give and start bewitching my mother [Emade’s daughter]’. (99)

Like Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*, Emade is a helpless object in her community. Even if she knows that she is being used by greedy men who exploit the brook, the serpent and the purification rite to serve their egoistic interests, Emade is ready to offer the sacrifice as she is part of that tradition which has shaped her thought and behavior. Her helplessness is evidenced by her plea to Ewang-Ename:

‘My son, dash to Ekenzu and tell Ahone, daughter-of-the-deities-of-Kupe-Muanenguba, that if she would attend my burial, she should leave whatever she intends to do on Monday and come to Atieg. You have heard the storm. Tell her, I am by the ‘mouth’ of my grave. Go, legs-of-the-hunting-dog.’ (ibid)

Such a plea from the Lady with a Beard, a very strong woman, proves that the heroine is facing the storm without the right tools to defy the odds. Her decision to send her daughter to the Mission to live with Teacher

George and his wife, and her statement “a cockroach is a cockroach, and even one with a mane should take refuge under cardboard if it expects to see another day” (104) confirms Ambanasom’s assertion that “Emade’s intimate attachment to her culture, in a way, becomes her bane” (*The Cameroonian Novel* 209). However, it is not the lady’s attachment to her culture that is her blight. Her bane results from the village men’s and women’s exploitation and interpretation of their rituals.

This misinterpretation of the rituals generates intolerance and a de facto rejection of gender and cultural differences which lead to Emade’s desire to become a male woman. Contrary to Ambanasom who notes that “The Lady with a Beard” is a derogatory nickname that belittles Emade, one may rather assert that this nickname is the author’s satire of menfolk who use their power to create exclusionary and oppressive communities. Emade wields the same power that men – who are endowed with a beard, a symbol of power – usually wield. Like anyone who has power, she becomes arrogant and tactless, thus humiliating the men and women of her community. Consequently, everything she does is considered outlandish and pointless as she herself acknowledges:

‘Why is it that a song sung and danced with such enthusiasm by everybody is made to carry the spikes of a porcupine. Why should the song make people look in one direction only? Are they the same people who blew cold while dancing, blowing hot at back stabbing corners now?’ (95-96)

The protagonist’s song so much enjoyed by her tribeswomen becomes a bone of contention because of the wrong meaning given to it by the same people who have enjoyed it so much. Emade’s numerous questions reveal her inability to understand the complexity of human nature and the absurdity of human life. Her sister Ahone thus instructs her: “Don’t you know that where there is love, hatred lurks with a walking stick? No person should take the world at face value” (96). Ahone’s answer and her sister’s questions expose man’s inability to know and grasp the meaning of the world he lives in. This shortcoming makes it difficult for men/women to control their environment, because what they know of their world are appearances whose real meanings – what Immanuel Kant terms “noumena” in *Critique of Pure Reason* – are hidden and still need to be deciphered. Emade fails to grasp that transcending some societal limits represents her doom in the same way Santiago, the old fisherman in Hemingway’s novel, fails to understand that going too far out to sea means ruining his luck.

The two novels under study thus reflect naturalistic pessimism and existentialist nihilism, as their protagonists brood over their actions which

have not yielded the fruits they expected. Despite his arduous fight and killing of the fish, Santiago takes nothing home but a skeleton. Commenting on Hemingway's novel, William Faulkner observes that Hemingway usually presents men and women who shape themselves out of their own clay, and their victories and defeats are at the hands of each other just to prove to themselves or one another how tough they can be. But with *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway writes about pity; about something somewhere that has made them all: the old man who has to catch the fish and then lose it, the fish that has to be caught and then lost, and the sharks which have to rob the old man of the fish (Meyers 415). Faulkner's bleak depiction of Santiago's situation is backed by the old man's confessions to Manolin toward the end of the book: "'The ocean is very big and a skiff is small and hard to see' the old man said. He noticed how pleasant it was to have someone to talk to instead of speaking only to himself and to the sea. 'I missed you,' he said" (124). The old man's statement is his acknowledgment of man's insignificance compared to the big size and power of the sea. This imbalance is evidenced by the title of the novel "The Old Man and the Sea," a combination of two contrary phrases, "The Old Man" and "the Sea." The first phrase implies frailty while the second one symbolizes strength.

"The Lady with a Beard," the title of Alobwed'Epie's novel, is also a bizarre blend of two opposites: "The Lady" connotes weakness in the Bakossi and most modern African cultures, while "Beard" stands for maleness or power in the same cultures. Emade's fierce resistance to her community's maneuvers only leads to her submissiveness to the dictates of the very community she has defied all along. At the close of the novel, she takes cognizance of the fact that she has foiled her tribesmen's attempts to destroy her, but presently, they are catching up with her (107). Neither her desperate visits to female and male soothsayers nor Ntube's (her daughter's) stay at the Mission can ward off the ill omen to appease her troubled mind. The humanistic value, characteristic of the second tension of Pizer's definition of the naturalistic novel, thus becomes the redeeming factor that can offset the characters' pessimism and nihilism.

Ritual, Technique and Being

Although *The Old Man and the Sea* and *The Lady with a Beard* embed naturalistic pessimism and existentialist nihilism, they focus more on man's actions and choices which give meaning to his environment and to his life within that environment. In the two novels, the main characters, Santiago and Emade, adopt the Sartrean argument that life has no a priori

meaning, and it is incumbent on men and women to give it meaning. To give meaning to life, the two protagonists give new significance to rituals by using correct technique / the cult of the job well done.

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, fishing, the ritual that brings on Santiago's failure, is also the choice that gives meaning to his life. In Hemingway's oeuvre, cooking, hunting, bullfighting and fishing are rituals that man performs to shape his existence and essence. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago wrestles with the big marlin which, to him, means food and fortune. In the Gulf Stream, people depend on fishing for food and money necessary to buy amenities. As a ritual that perpetuates life, fishing requires correct technique which the old fisherman applies in every one of his actions. He is interested in the minutiae of fishing and he carries out his activities with care and method:

...He looked down into the water and watched the lines that went straight down into the dark of the water. He kept them straighter than anyone did, so that at each level in the darkness of the stream there would be a bait waiting exactly where he wished it to be for any fish that swam there. Others let them drift with the current and sometimes they were at sixty fathoms when the fishermen thought they were at a hundred.

But, he thought, I keep them with precision. Only I have no luck any more. But who knows? Maybe today. Every day is a new day. It is better to be lucky. But I would rather be exact. Then when luck comes you are ready. (Hemingway 32)

The sentences "He kept them straighter than anyone did," "waiting exactly where he wished it to be," "I keep them with precision," "I would rather be exact" are statements which show that the author prefers correct technique to luck. Exactness and expert knowledge make a human being ready to defy the odds. It is because the old man masters the art of fishing that he can grow slowly and steadily without hurrying, while he keeps his lines straight up and down (33).

Thanks to his correct technique, the old and tired fisherman can single-handedly catch the biggest fish he has ever caught. Besides technique, Santiago relies on his endurance and willpower that are manifest in the author's repetition of the verb "try": "But I will try it once more...He tried it once more... I will try it again... He tried it again and it was the same...I will try it once again" (93). The recurrent "I" proves that the fisherman is master of his destiny; he alone chooses his actions and thus asserts his freedom despite the cruel setting (the sea and its sharks), the sun that hurts his eyes (32, 33, 35, 40, 36, 57, 68, 70), and the obsolescent equipment (the skiff, oars, harpoon, and tiller). As Gurko rightly points out, "*The Old Man and the Sea* is remarkable for its stress on what men

can do and on the world as an arena where heroic deeds are possible” (*College English* 11). Natural elements set limits for man, and the greatest of these natural limits is death – a central theme in Hemingway’s oeuvre – which makes life void of meaning. Yet man takes his course of action to give meaning to his life. In his novel, Hemingway’s use of water and animal imagery is thus balanced by his use of minute details to describe Santiago’s skiff, weapons, and fishing activities.

Man faces his destiny alone in nature, which calls to mind Hemingway’s primitivism (return and closeness to nature) and his vision of death and life, rituals which must be performed according to set rules. One should kill, live, and die well as Santiago purports: “‘I killed him [the shark] in self-defense,’ the old man said aloud. ‘And I killed him well’” (106). Killing and dying well are primary occupations in Hemingway’s writings. The author was in contact with death at a very early age, as his father quickly taught him not only to like nature, but also to shoot wild game and birds. Before his experiences in the First World War, where he served as an ambulance driver for the Red Cross in Italy, Hemingway was already preoccupied with death and how one should face it. The First and Second World Wars and his father’s suicide only deepened his feelings about death. Killing is therefore a ritual that should be properly performed according to a set code which combines honor, courage and endurance. His characters are exemplars of this code and rightly fit Gurko’s definition of the hero: “To be a hero means to dare more than other men, to expose oneself to greater dangers, and therefore more greatly to risk the possibilities of defeat and death” (*College English* 12). Like Santiago and many of his other protagonists, Hemingway always exposed himself to greater dangers. As a boy, he liked to box, even if this exercise damaged his eye. In 1918, he was seriously wounded and had to undergo surgery. In 1944, he joined the United States Navy and cruised off the coast of Cuba with a plan for the destruction of U-boats in this area. Shortly before the invasion of France, he was in a car crash and his head was seriously injured.

In 1934, Hemingway traveled to Tanganyika to hunt bulls in the Kenyan jungle. Soon after this expedition, he wrote *Green Hills of Africa* (1935), a novel which praises action and in which he expresses his wish to return to Africa, the nature continent “where it pleased him to live; to really live. Not just let his life pass” (214). The author’s dream of returning to Africa came true when he went on safari in Kenya in 1953-1954. In “Going Home: Hemingway, Primitivism, and Identity,” Suzanne del Gizzo observes that Hemingway’s reference to Africa as “home” in *Green Hills of Africa* and in his posthumous book *True at First Light*, may

be “tainted by an unmistakable note of imperialism, but it nonetheless reveals how deeply he wished to connect to Africa and African culture” (*MFS* 497). Hemingway’s connection to Africa and its cultures thus proves beyond doubt that he knew some of the African rituals and rites, especially initiation rites and the rite of passage from childhood to manhood/womanhood. His eagerness to go back to Africa also indicates his wish to be close to nature where man can prove to himself that he is a real man.

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago remarks:

‘I’ll kill him [the marlin] though,’ he said. ‘In all his greatness and his glory.’ ‘Although it is unjust,’ he thought. ‘But I will show him what a man can do and what a man endures.’ ‘I told the boy I was a strange old man,’ he said. ‘Now is when I must prove it.’ (66)

Proving what he can do and what he endures is man’s challenge to the odds and death that threaten his life. It is in solitariness at the open sea that Santiago proves to the big marlin that time has passed, yet he, the former campeón (champion) can still challenge space (the huge sea) and time (his old age).

Fishing, a ritual that Santiago performs with correct technique, enables him to achieve greatness and immortality. As Beaver notes, “technique is something one learns from a teacher” (*College English* 326). Santiago, a teacher, transmits his art to Manolin, his neophyte. According to Gurko, this master-pupil relationship “suggests that the heroic impulse is part of a traditional process handed down from one generation to another, that the world is a continuous skein of possibility and affirmation” (*College English* 13). Undeniably, Santiago’s teachings ensure the continuity of the fishermen’s profession and ritual. This continuity is symbolized by his acts and instructions at the end of the novel: he gives his spear to Manolin – who stands as his heir – and instructs him to give the head of the marlin to Pedrico who will chop it up and use it in fish traps. Giving the spear to Manolin represents a rite of passage which indicates Manolin’s growth, his passage from boyhood to manhood. *In fine*, even if the old fisherman has lost the fish, he still has a firm grasp of his fishing ritual and Manolin still has much to learn from him. Santiago is therefore beaten by the sharks which have deprived him of his marlin, yet he is still a great craftsman like DiMaggio who is a great baseball player. The protagonist still informs Manolin about the new equipment they must buy for their next fishing expedition (*The Old* 125). His dreams about the lions at the close of the text symbolize greatness. The numerous occurrences of the adjective “great” on more than 14 pages (pages 17, 18, 21, 23, 24, 28, 30, 31, 70, 76...) prove that Hemingway’s novel celebrates men and women who do

their work well and thus teach correct technique to posterity because this asset gives meaning to life and secures human beings' greatness and survival in the world.

Alobwed'Epie's novel also celebrates men's and women's strong will and correct technique. Emade is a sort of pathfinder because of her new interpretation and use of the Bakossi rituals. She gives new significance to birth, marriage, naming, and death rituals, and to the foundations, existence and practices of the sacred societies. In her "Doctorat de 3ème Cycle" thesis project, Balbina Mesue Mesame highlights the great number of ritual ceremonies which constitute the wealthy cultural heritage of the Bakossi (9). In *The Lady with a Beard*, no character is more aware of the importance of these rituals than Emade. She systematically calls the other characters by their names and by the Bakossi meanings of these names. She calls her daughter Ntube Daughter-of-the-upstream-python, Mechane is named Wife-of-the-water-source (30), and Mboke is Daughter-of-the-roaring-lion (19). Emade herself is referred to as Daughter-of-the-deities-of-Kupe-and-Muanenguba, widow-of-the-upstream-python (32). Wobe (Mechane's daughter) is nicknamed Daughter-of-the-pumpkin-plant that bears fruit even in neighbor's farms (74), while Ahone is Daughter-of-the-deities-of-Kupe-Muanenguba and Ewang-Ename is called legs-of-the-hunting-dog (99). Though all these appellations create humor, they show the protagonist's good mastery of her culture and her wish to clarify things and perform rituals according to the established rules.

Consequently, Emade does not rebel against traditions but rather against men's failure to implement them well. Unlike Perpetua Manyor Agbor's *Maîtrise* dissertation, "Trans-Gender in Nadine Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me* and Alobwed'Epie's *The Lady with a Beard*" (2007), which stresses the reformulation of gender roles, my paper lays emphasis on correct technique / the work well done. Emade's correct technique is recognized by her countrymen when four elderly men ask her to play the drums to make people dance. The men's affirmative answer to the protagonist's question "'Satisfy them in digging graves, in incarnating Muankum, in solving disputes at the boundaries of villages, in playing drums?" indicates that men have failed to assume responsibility. Therefore, the message of Alobwed'Epie's text is the following: society should acknowledge the contribution of the man/ woman who performs well the task he/ she is assigned.

Like old Santiago, Emade asserts her being through her correct technique which is acknowledged right at the opening of the novel: "Ntube admired her mother peel cocoyams with the dexterity of a machine. Although her hands were dirty, she peeled the cocoyams clean and threw

them into the pot on the fire with a near perfect regularity” (5). The phrases “the dexterity of a machine,” “with a near perfect regularity” introduce Emade as a perfectionist and throughout the text, the quest for perfection remains her main attribute. The women of Atieg call her “a master craftswoman” (18). As a perfectionist and a craftswoman, she can perceive men’s flaws in carrying out some rituals; she therefore successfully guards the entrance of the village and beats the drums to perfection during Mechane’s funeral. She does not only blacken Mechane’s grave, but without help, she builds a ten-foot-high heap of stones on it and “the stones were painfully laid, as if by a skilled bricklayer” (86). In solitude in Mechane’s compound, Emade, like Santiago, achieves greatness. The building of the stone structure to protect Mechane’s land is an achievement which boosts her ego and earns her the respect and admiration of the Atieg and Muabag women. To ensure the continuity of her deceased sister’s family, Emade modifies the ritual of the closing of the door by throwing the key at the door and not into the bush as the tradition requires. Her act aims to inform the village men and women that they only need a modicum of common sense to understand that Mechane’s family is not extinct as long as her daughter Wobe and her children are alive.

Alobwed’Epie’s heroine is a good teacher like Hemingway’s protagonist because both aptly transmit their craftsmanship to their progeny. The naming ceremony is the dreamed of opportunity for Emade to teach her daughter the significance of some of the Bakossi rites and their relationship to life. Her statement: “‘Mother,’ she addressed her. ‘Pay keen attention to the ceremony. It is the essence of life’” (76) validates my assertion that Alobwed’Epie views life as a ritual whose successful performance determines one’s being. The naming ceremony symbolizes the continuity of life as it binds the child to his/her mother, reinforces the mystical link between the living and the dead, and builds in the child a sense of belonging to the tribe and the world. As Nyango Diele performs this rite so well, Emade embraces her several times for “the job well done” (79). She also hugs Ntube who answers the questions on the naming ceremony “exceedingly well” (80).

Like Hemingway, Alobwed’Epie holds that correct technique gives sense to one’s life. When his heroine, Emade, notices that the absence of the totemic cloth, blankets and a pig, will mar the rituals that must be performed during and after Mechane’s burial, she willingly supplies the missing items. Likewise, when the lack of the eighth song becomes an impediment to the performance of the naming ritual, she quickly provides a song, which the village women consider a Muankum song. But Emade,

the artist, knows that “all dance songs lead to dance and that song and dance take their hue from the mind” (82). The protagonist demystifies the Muankum and only highlights the importance of the creative mind that has produced the chant, a creation that asserts one’s being. She also emphasizes the fact that the art of drumming must unite the body and the soul, the living and the dead (63), which shows continuity of life after death through art and creation.

Alobwed’Epie’s penchant for correct technique is evidenced by his use of verbs of action and his repetition of the adverbs “exquisitely” and “well” and other expressions that are related to technique: “They played the drums so exquisitely well” (59), “She had pegged out the grave with great craftsmanship and was digging it with the mastery of a professional” (44), “exquisite drummer” (60), “the dexterous drummer” (65), “exquisite drumming” (65). All these details prove that for Alobwed’Epie who, like old Santiago, cannot rely on luck, correct technique is his life raft. In his dissertation, Joseph Sylvain Andzongo Ngono quotes Alobwed’Epie who remarks during an interview:

I remember that from 1984 after I had done my Doctorate degree, I found that whatever I did went wrong. Everything I did went wrong. I bought land and I lost it. I tried to invest; I lost the investment. I became extremely miserable...nothing worked; absolutely nothing. Then it dawned on me that I should start writing. (79-80)

The author’s remark shows naturalistic pessimism and existentialist nihilism. However, for a man who is convinced that luck is delusion, technique and inventiveness become the compensating values. Money can be lost, an investment may be a complete failure, and spirits droop, yet creativity and the work well done are the choices that make life meaningful. This thus gives significance to Emade’s decision to jettison the soothsayer’s divination and only seek solace in the correct performance of her final ritualistic act. The use of holy water to perform a Bakossi ritual against ill omen proves that Emade is a pathfinder who reconciles Bakossi and Christian rituals. Unlike her sister Ahone who separates tradition and logic (42), she demonstrates that observance of tradition and logic are not incompatible. Alobwed’Epie also blends Bakossi words and proverbs, Pidgin English and Standard English in his novel, and thus brings together Bakossi traditions and the Christian religion. Similarly, in *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway binds the Cuban fishing ritual to baseball, a game in American civilization.

This paper has supported my claim that the American and the Cameroonian authors blend naturalism and existentialism through their