

**Two West African Voices in search of Decolonization:**

**Kofi Awoonor and Christopher Okigbo**

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صوتان من غرب أفريقيا في البحث عن التحرر من الاستعمار:

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## Two West African Voices in search of Decolonization:

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### Abstract

This study traces the process of decolonization in the poetry of two West African poets; Kofi Awoonor from Ghana and Christopher Okigbo from Nigeria. The chosen poets represent two distinct models toward decolonization. Decolonization is chosen as the topic of this study for its powerful presence in and effect on the literature of West Africa. In the process of decolonization, Awoonor and Okigbo seek to underscore the importance of Africans' returning to their roots as a means of reshaping their identities which the colonizers were determined to obliterate. They undertake, as their responsibility, to resist the literary manifestations of imperialism and direct their peoples towards forming an indigenous cultural identity. They succeed to incorporate the imagery of West African myth and folklore to revive the past and connect it with the present hoping to reconstruct a bright future for their people. Many critics have tackled decolonization in their critical writings; among them were Frantz Fanon, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Edward Said and Bill Ashcroft. The study makes use of some of these views with special reference to Fanon and Nugugi

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### ملخص البحث

تتبع هذه الدراسة بالتحليل قضية التحرر من الاستعمار في أعمال شاعرين من شعراء غرب أفريقيا: كوفي أوونر من غانا، وكريستوفر أوكيجبو من نيجيريا. حيث يمثل كل شاعر نمطاً مميزاً في تناول قضية التحرر من الاستعمار. واختارت الباحثة قضية التحرر من الاستعمار لتكون عنواناً لهذه الدراسة لحضورها القوي في أدب الغرب الأفريقي. ويهدف أوونر و أوكيجبو في سعيهما نحو التحرر للتأكيد على أهمية عودة الأفارقة لجذورهم كوسيلة لإعادة تشكيل هويتهم التي كثيراً ما سعى المستعمر لطمسها. ويتعهد كلا الشاعرين بمسؤوليتهما في مقاومة الصور الأدبية للإمبريالية وتوجيه شعبيهما صوب تشكيل هوية ثقافية أصلية. ونجح كلا الكاتبين في دمج صوراً أسطورية من غرب أفريقيا مع قصصها الشعبي أملاً في إحياء الماضي وربطه مع الحاضر ليشكل مستقبلاً باهراً لشعبيهما. وقد تناول الكثير من النقاد التحرر من الاستعمار في كتاباتهم النقدية: منهم على سبيل المثال فرانز فانون، ونجوجي وا ثينجو، وإدوارد سعيد، وبل أشكروفت. وستتناول هذه الدراسة بالشرح بعضاً من تلك الآراء مع تسليط الضوء على آراء كل من فانون ونجوجي.

## **Two West African Voices in search of Decolonization:**

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With the Berlin Conference in 1885, in what was later known as "the scramble for Africa"<sup>1</sup> Africa was divided into many territories ruled by seven great European countries at that time: Britain, France, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Germany and Portugal<sup>2</sup>. It has been assumed by the colonial countries that they came to Africa in a civilizing mission for the continent. Another aim assumed by colonial powers was the needed colonial economic development for the benefit of all humankind. However their main objective was to control other peoples' land and raw materials. It is true that the domination of the colonized was entailed by a capitalist view from European colonizers. Edward Said considered European colonialism as a specific form of imperialism which is used to describe the late 19<sup>th</sup> century policy of European expansion.<sup>3</sup>

European imperialism imposed its command on its colonies and profited from their labor and human resources. Therefore, it needed to exploit these countries to ensure its own growth for these colonies also provided markets for European industry and goods. As emphasized by Raymond Betts "Imperialism... was rapacious capitalism expanded overseas in a desperate search for new markets and resources to command, other people to oppress, all motivated by the desire for investment opportunities and subsequent profit"<sup>4</sup>. Being economically, politically and even culturally suppressed and deprived of their human rights, the colonized peoples in Africa, Asia and Latin America sought their freedom from the thralldom of colonization. These attempts of those peoples can be recorded as part of what is known as decolonization.

Decolonization came into being after the First World War, but its influential presence could easily be seen with the agitated feelings of the colonized countries to gain their independence after the Second World War (WW II) in 1945. It became popular after the (WW II) as it denoted

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Pakenham xxiii

<sup>2</sup> David Birmingham 1

<sup>3</sup> Edward Said 9

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Betts 14

'cleansing changes',<sup>5</sup> describing the continuing problems of political and social exploitation in the contemporary world and the struggle on the part of the exploited to terminate this situation.

This study focuses on decolonization as a process that prevailed after the (WW II) and handles some critical views concerning it. Frantz Fanon and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's views are discussed largely. Both writers stress the urgent need of Africans to restore their identity through coming in contact with their history, indigenous languages and traditions. Fanon and Ngũgĩ are two voices expressing the African continent and both are aware of the suffering of its peoples. Hence, Fanon and Ngũgĩ's critical views center on decolonization through resistance and nationalism. This implies rejecting the stereotypical images of Africans imposed by the colonialists and reconstructing true and authentic ones. Fulfillment of this task comes through stressing indigenous traditions and relating them to the present.

David Birmingham defines decolonization as a turning point in the history of post war world, championed by idealists who believed in racial equality and individual liberty. He identified Kwame Nkrumah from West Africa and Nelson Mandela from South Africa as apostles of black freedom<sup>6</sup>. As asserted by Awoonor, "independence took a giddily short period of five years, from 1957 to 1962, to achieve a strip-down of Europe's colonial empires. In the process, the colonial regimes had been chased out of their power bases, and an African leadership took over"<sup>7</sup>.

On a different level, Bill Ashcroft defines decolonization as:

the process of revealing and dismantling colonialist power in all its forms. This includes dismantling the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power and that remain even after political independence<sup>8</sup>.

This definition implies the struggle of the colonized and the exploited to demolish all the colonial and neocolonial practices against them. It also

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<sup>5</sup> Betts 1

<sup>6</sup> Birmingham 1

<sup>7</sup> Kofi Awoonor 1975, 31

<sup>8</sup> Bill Ashcroft 2000, 63

includes changes of attitude and mentality of those communities. These countries are motivated to reverse the false stereotypes provided by colonialism. They need to prove and rediscover their true identity through being committed to their traditions and cultural heritage.

By and large, political independence in the 1950-60s was the outcome of sincere efforts exerted by national liberation movements all over the colonized countries. Ghana is an example in which Kwame Nkrumah followed a nonviolent movement to liberate Ghana from the British rule. Like Mahatma Ghandi of India, Nkrumah organized strikes and boycotts that ended successfully with the independence of Ghana<sup>9</sup>. In contrast to Ghana, Kenya had to use power against their European rulers to gain their independence. Mau Mau was a secret society that was made up of native Kenyan farmers forced out of the highlands by the British. The basic aim of this movement was to regain their land. Mau Mau used guerrilla war tactics to push white farmers from the highlands. Kenya was granted its independence in 1963<sup>10</sup>.

Accordingly, the 1960s witnessed the surge of decolonization as a central and dramatic factor that affected the political change in the whole of Africa. Therefore, literature produced in these postcolonial communities is always related to powerful trials of decolonization. Ania Loomba emphasizes placing postcolonial studies within two contexts. The first is the history of decolonization itself where intellectuals “challenged and revised dominant definitions of race, culture, language and class in the process of making their voices heard”<sup>11</sup>. The second context is the revaluation within 'western' intellectual traditions in thinking about some of the same issues. It is evident that decolonization gained its depth and force in the former African colonized nations where struggle reached its extreme limits. And it is obvious in West African countries like Ghana and Nigeria which fell under the siege of colonization.

West African literature represented in Ghana and Nigeria is described among postcolonial literatures which signify the historical period following the end of European colonialism. As Stephanie Newell states

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<sup>9</sup> Awoonor 1972, 42

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 43

<sup>11</sup> Ania Loomba 20

"the unhyphenated word 'postcolonial' signifies the wide range of discourses, ideologies and intellectual formations which have emerged from cultures that experienced imperial encounters"<sup>12</sup>.

Newell also asserts that postcolonialism for West Africa does not only mean the period after the end of colonialism, rather it extends to include the " complex ways in which colonial history continues to shadow daily life in West Africa without fully dominating it or dictating it"<sup>13</sup>. The creation of cultural and political identities in West Africa involves a great effort of literary activity on the part of many intellectuals and poets who play important roles in the formation of the political history of this region. As asserted by Newell, "the involvement of writers in the production of resistant and oppositional identities is a key feature of West Africa's cultural history, emerging out of traditional griot and praise-singer roles"<sup>14</sup>.

Frantz Fanon was one of a few extraordinary and influential thinkers supporting decolonization struggles occurring after (WW II). He proposes a strategy for the colonized to achieve his freedom and regain his humanity. Speaking to the colonized only, Fanon says "Natives of all underdeveloped countries unite"<sup>15</sup>. The message is directed to the people of underdeveloped countries, calling them to integrate and unite to face the danger of colonialism.

Fanon points out that achieving revolutionary socialism is the acknowledged way to defeat the former master rather than being defeated in colonial and imperialist aggression. Fanon speaks for his brothers, denouncing neo-colonialism: "Europe has laid her hands on our continents, and we must slash at her fingers till she lets go... let us burst into history, forcing it by our invasion into universality for the first time. Let us start fighting; and if we've no other arms, the waiting knife's enough"<sup>16</sup>.

Violence, on the part of the colonized, would be in the aim of reshaping a new man capable of destroying in him and around him" the

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<sup>12</sup> Stephanie Newell 3

<sup>13</sup> Newell,4

<sup>14</sup> Ibid 19

<sup>15</sup> Frantz Fanon 1963, 10

<sup>16</sup> Ibid 12-13

colonial gloom"<sup>17</sup>. Thus Fanon's own writings paved the way for this change where every oppressed person could thrust oppression represented in colonialism through emancipating himself from all these vicious practices against him. Therefore, decolonization is mainly entailed by national liberation.

For Fanon, decolonization is the process of "the replacing of a certain 'species' of men by another 'species' of men"<sup>18</sup>. From this perspective the colonized people demand a need for change which includes that of the social structure. This change also lies in the consciousness of those colonized people, "but the possibility of this change is equally experienced in the form of a terrifying future in the consciousness of another 'species' of men and women: the colonizers"<sup>19</sup>. It is a call for a reverse situation in which "the last shall be first and the first last"<sup>20</sup>.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon urges Africans and those who are exploited and oppressed to get rid of the European influence which is planted in their consciousness and to create their new self that goes with their essence and traditions:

Let us decide not to imitate Europe; let us combine our muscles and our brains in a new direction. Let us try to create the whole man whom Europe has been incapable of bringing to triumphant birth...<sup>21</sup>

Fanon agreed with the cultural exchange and the contact between civilizations but what he didn't agree with was the domination and imposition of one's human social, political and cultural values and traditions by another group. Fanon's conception of decolonization involved many processes to be followed in order to suppress any colonial or capitalist power. Among these processes is resistance of colonial domination and dehumanization. Fanon pointed out that the search for identity and the exploration of the black self or Africanness and freedom

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid 21

<sup>18</sup> Fanon 1963, 35

<sup>19</sup> Ibid 36

<sup>20</sup> Ibid 37

<sup>21</sup> Ibid 313

were among the most obvious and powerful steps towards achieving decolonization and not only the achievement of political freedom<sup>22</sup>.

Decolonization, according to Fanon, requires a return to the pre-colonial history and culture of the colonized nation. Fanon claims that the settler in the colonies creates the history of his mother country and is conscious of making it. The history recorded is not the history of these colonized countries but that of the nation of the settler. If the colonized is determined to change this situation, he must "put an end to the history of colonization- the history of Pillage- and bring into existence the history of the nation- the history of decolonization"<sup>23</sup>.

There are different directions and means to be employed in the path of true decolonization. Among these directions are resistance and nationalism. Resistance here implies rejecting all the ideas, practices and images imposed by the colonizer, and replacing them with images derived from the literary heritage of the colonized. Social and cultural forms of resistance have always been associated with the political struggle as Ashcroft claims since all these forms say "no" to the colonizer<sup>24</sup>.

The question of cultural resistance is of great relevance in the process of decolonization. For many intellectuals and especially Frantz Fanon it is only through opposing the European stereotypes of the African image and forming their own 'national culture' which is fundamentally attached to the inherited past and its cultural legacy that the Africans would be able to decolonize themselves and their society. According to Fanon, "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's head of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today"<sup>25</sup>.

Cultural nationalism is based on a cultural identity which may have religious and ethnic connotations as well. In cultural nationalism it is essential for Africans to relate to all the customs and traditions of Africa

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid 313

<sup>23</sup> Fanon 1963, 51

<sup>24</sup> Ashcroft 2001, 20

<sup>25</sup> Fanon 1963, 210

for national liberation. What they yearn for is a free nation in which their culture could flourish within its own borders. Thus most of the intelligentsia in the colonized territories sought to create this kind of nationalism which is defined by Chaim Gans in *The Limits of Nationalism* as the kind of nationalism "according to which members of groups sharing a common history and societal culture have a fundamental, morally significant interest in adhering to their culture and in sustaining it for generations"<sup>26</sup>. Furthermore, Gans gives a distinction between cultural nationalism and statist nationalism by claiming that while cultural nationalism focuses on the interest people have in their own culture, statist nationalism's main focus is on the interests of the state in "the cultural homogeneity of their citizenries"<sup>27</sup>.

The resurrection of the past is in itself a pressing need in African nationalism because it was the ancestors who had made history. It was their heroic past and glory which provided legitimacy for the other generations. Thus, the endeavor of those nationalists is to invoke the glorious pre-colonial past and traditions embodied in their culture and which the colonizers tried to annihilate.

In short, Fanon's concept of revolutionary decolonization expresses his hopes for a new world where human beings become themselves, able to detest, despise and even destroy those who deny their rights as human beings. These hopes can be achieved through liberation from "the suffocating embrace of Europe and the pretensions of its civilization"<sup>28</sup>.

In a similar vein, Ngugi Wa Thoingo succinctly expresses his views on the process of decolonization. In his influential book *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngugi develops two basic principles that will help so much in achieving decolonization; the language used by the African writer and the quest for relevance. As for language, Ngugi stresses the centrality of African languages in the writings and education of Africans. For Ngugi, language is a medium that carries both history and culture "particularly through orature and literature; the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world"<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Chaim Gans 1

<sup>27</sup> Gans 1

<sup>28</sup> Fanon [1952] 2008, xii

<sup>29</sup> Ngugi Wa Thoingo 1994, 16

Ngugi observes a 'ceaseless' struggle among African people to liberate their economy, politics and cultures from the clutches of imperialism in its colonial and neocolonial phases to realize true self determination. For Ngugi language has a dual aspect. One is that it is a means of communication and the other is a carrier of culture. Since culture embodies the moral, ethical and aesthetic values of any given society, colonialism as such aims at controlling many aspects of the colonized life. Therefore the most important area colonialism has dominated is the "mental universe of the colonized"<sup>30</sup>. It has seized its control through culture because "To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self definition in relationship to others"<sup>31</sup>.

In *Moving the Centre*, Ngugi exposes the ways by which any African writer can achieve cultural decolonization. He holds the assumption that to understand the dynamics of any society; the cultural aspects should not be separated from their economic and political ones. The power of any society affects and is affected by the values of that society which are embodied in its culture. Thus Ngugi writes: "the wealth and power and self- image of a community are inseparable"<sup>32</sup>.

Ngugi as such calls for cultural freedom. He insists that cultures that "reflect the ever- changing dynamics of internal relations and which maintain a balanced give and take with external relations are the ones that are healthy"<sup>33</sup>. But cultures which are controlled or dominated by others are destined to be deformed or die. Consequently, Ngugi feels the need for postcolonial countries to encounter the Western hegemony and oppose the forces of the new order. He stresses the call for new equitable international relations in economic, political and cultural fields between the nations<sup>34</sup>.

Furthermore, Ngugi believes in the need for Africans to have power and build themselves a strong foundation to fight for their rights and their future. He insists that Africans need to go back to their own roots, find their strength and fight the battle on familiar ground. Their rich and

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid 16

<sup>31</sup> Ngugi 1994, 16

<sup>32</sup> Ngugi 1993, 15

<sup>33</sup> Ibid 16

<sup>34</sup> Ibid 16

valuable heritage should be preserved in an attempt to face the forces that impede Africa's development. The intellectual who wants the liberation of his African people should put his intellectual resources and literary imagination in the service of his people. He should be confident that what he articulates in his writings must be in harmony with the needs of the struggling classes in Africa.

Ngugi classifies two cultural traditions in Africa. The first tradition coincides with imperialism which aims at undermining people's belief in their struggle to achieve liberation. It is adopted by many regimes which help in the backwardness of their people<sup>35</sup>. The other is a patriotic national tradition "developing in resistance and opposition to imperialist-sanctioned African culture"<sup>36</sup>. This tradition appears in many cultural forms whether in poetry, songs, drama, sculpture or dances and those forms look to the past adding new contents or elements related to the present. They also try to incorporate new forms.

Throughout African history, people struggled against slave trade and slavery, against the colonial invasions and the colonial power even with armed resistance. Even today they continue their struggle against the danger of neocolonialism. Describing the vital role of intellectuals in this process, Ngugi declares that the African writers have always played an important role in these struggles as they

can draw pictures of the universe and its workings to instill fear, despondence and self- doubt in the oppressed while legitimizing the world of the oppressor nations and classes as the norm; or they can draw pictures that instill clarity, strength, hope to the struggles of the exploited and the oppressed to realize their visions of a new tomorrow<sup>37</sup>.

Similar to Fanon, Ngugi sees that the problem lies in the ideology of racism which is used as a weapon to "numb human sensibility"<sup>38</sup>. It is embedded in all walks of life, ending up with numbing the general consciousness in society. Ngugi writes: "Personal relationships, feelings, attitudes, values, outlook, self perception and perception of others, even

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid 62

<sup>36</sup> Ngugi 1993, 62

<sup>37</sup> Ibid 72-3

<sup>38</sup> Ibid 139

in the everyday acts of daily livings, become affected by racism"<sup>39</sup>. He believes that racism is meant to weaken and even prevent resistance and its leaders from making fundamental changes in their societies.

Accordingly, a tendency toward creating and reconstructing a new personality is evident especially in the writings of West African poets. Among them are Kofi Awoonor and Christopher Okigbo. Their work is, to a great deal, identifiable with what Ngugi and Fanon believe to be the task of the African writer. Both writers believe in cultural self-discovery as an important aspect in their quest for self-consciousness. They are motivated by their burning desire to revive their traditional cultural heritage. As a result, their poetry reflects the spirit of West Africa.

West African poetry is marked by the tendency of its poets to depict the African experience manifested in the struggle of its people to dismantle the colonial and neocolonial practices in African politics and culture. Both Awoonor and Okigbo resist the literary manifestations of imperialism and write when imperialism had passed and the challenges to colonialism could no longer be ignored within European empires. Their work questions and resists European hegemony and at the same time creates newly inventive and independent voices that contribute to the project of cultural autonomy.

Kofi Awoonor stresses the rediscovery of cultural identity in many of his poetic volumes such as *Rediscovery and Other Poems* (1964), *Night of my Blood* (1971) and *The House by the Sea* (1987). The interest in Awoonor's works lies in his recurrent attempts at criticizing and resisting the colonizing forces and strategies of domination that caused Africa's economic and cultural deterioration. Connor Ryan pinpoints that Awoonor and Armah based their writings on the evil consequences of neocolonialism as previously viewed by Fanon. For Fanon, the anti-colonial struggle entails a struggle for national consciousness and cultural nationalism which were the concerns throughout Awoonor's writings<sup>40</sup>. Similarly, Parekh Pushpa states in *Postcolonial African Writers* "In all his work, Awoonor renders consistently a forceful critique of and resistance

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid 139

<sup>40</sup> Connor Ryan 57

to the colonizing and neo-colonizing strategies of domination over Africa's economic and cultural production."<sup>41</sup>

In "More Messages", Awoonor stresses the predicament of the poet who insists on keeping the traditional African mores. The speaker exposes his yearning for:

the sunlight fall on the green waters  
and the ferrymen hurrying home  
across with their heavy cargoes<sup>42</sup>

He even wonders why he could not eat with elders, "though my hands are washed clean in the salt river"<sup>43</sup>. The speaker knows the value of the antecedent fathers and recalls "the end of our journey/promising our palms shall prosper"<sup>44</sup>. He is sure that the young will not die if they live in the same land "where our fathers/ lingered, ate from land and sea drank the sweet of the ancient palms"<sup>45</sup>. Accordingly, the young would grow up to represent the collective memory and conscience of his society.

For Awoonor, the poet plays the role of the priest who acts as a vehicle of his society's energies and that is what Cox thinks of Awoonor's elegiac songs. For Cox these songs function as "expressions of a collective desolation and as an elegy for the spiritual death of an entire culture and the passing of an era"<sup>46</sup>. In this context, Awoonor's feelings embody what Fanon has remarked as the first phase towards rejecting the European influence when he stresses the importance of not imitating Europe. Fanon puts it clear when he said "Let us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions, and societies which draw their inspiration from her"<sup>47</sup>. Instead, the Africans should feel proud of their past and ancestral heritage.

The works of Christopher Okigbo echo the same issues raised by Awoonor's poetry; that is the establishment of man's true relationship

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<sup>41</sup> Parekh Pushpa 53

<sup>42</sup> Awoonor 1987, 51

<sup>43</sup> Ibid 51

<sup>44</sup> Awoonor 1987, 51

<sup>45</sup> Ibid 51

<sup>46</sup> C. Brian Cox 65

<sup>47</sup> Fanon 1963, 313-315

with his past. Okigbo therefore searches through the medium of his poetry to re-establish a contact with his cultural past in order to achieve a unified sensibility and so eliminate the conflict in his being. Chukwuma Azuonye has outlined five factors which made Okigbo's status in African literature. From these factors, he mentions Okigbo's ability to fuse a wide diversity of poetic modes from traditions across the world and his comprehensive vision of reality. Furthermore, Azuonye asserts Okigbo's main concern with decolonization of the mind, cultural freedom, human rights and civil liberties. Obviously, these ideas are reflected in the critical views of both Fanon and Ngugi.<sup>48</sup>

Accordingly, Okigbo's poem "The Passage" displays his keen interest in keeping with one's native deities and religion as a way of preserving his true African identity. The speaker of the poem is the humble prodigal who will remain so till the end of his journey: "Before you, mother Idoto, /naked I stand; before your watery presence a prodigal"<sup>49</sup>.

Thus, the muse invoked is "mother Idoto", goddess of the river. The speaker in the first section of the poem gives a picture of traditions in Igbo society where he admits being "naked" and "a prodigal" for he is not pretending to be innocent. He confesses his being powerless. He also needs help and support from "mother Idoto", so he leans on "an oil bean" which is considered a "legendary tree of knowledge"<sup>50</sup>. He is waiting for her power on his barefoot, waiting for "watchword at Heavensgate"<sup>51</sup>. In Igbo religion, Idoto is considered a river and also a deity and Okigbo's maternal grandfather was the priest of this deity who was worshipped at the Ajani Shrine<sup>52</sup>.

The water goddess may symbolize a female deity to be worshipped and as stated by Udoeyop this idea is known by Okigbo from the heritage and belief of his villagers in a female water spirit called "mammy water"<sup>53</sup> or it may symbolize women in general. The next section "Dark waters of the beginning" provides a kind of "double vision" or divided sensibility where the poet combines native and Christian symbolism:

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<sup>48</sup> Chukwuma Azuonye 4

<sup>49</sup> Labyrinths 3

<sup>50</sup> Donatus Nwoga 56

<sup>51</sup> Labyrinths 3

<sup>52</sup> Nwoga 15

<sup>53</sup> Nwoga 56

"Rainbow on far side, arched like boa bent to kill/ foreshadows the rain that is dreamed of" <sup>54</sup>. The rainbow in the Christian religion is a symbol of mercy where God promises never to "destroy the world by flood"<sup>55</sup>. But in African mythology it is associated with "the boa" which is described as "bent to kill". Thus Okigbo fuses traditional and Christian mythologies referring to the divided sensibility of the poet. The poet is confused at this stage who is the real savior "the Christian God or the native one"?<sup>56</sup>

Religion has a dominant note in "Passage". The Christian procession in "Passage" causes the poet's bewilderment when he reaches a turning point in his poetic development. The Christian procession is marked by the mourning color "festivity in black ...."<sup>57</sup> identifying the poet's mood with traditional feelings of loss and alienation associated with mourning. This idea keeps up with what Edward Said maintains about the writer as destined by the history and culture of his society; reflecting the social, historical and cultural realities of his social milieu<sup>58</sup>.

As a sign of rejecting Christianity which caused the African to feel alienated, Okigbo describes "Silent faces at crossroads: festivity in black.../ faces of black like long black column of ants"<sup>59</sup>. It is a kind of festival in the church where ringing bells and music are heard. But it is presumably unhappy festival for it is "festivity in black" and the faces of people are described as "silent faces". The poet seems to refer to the Christian faith and procession which causes grief at that time because it is a sign of abandoning the native religion which he mourns. Thus the poet preludes to his renunciation or rejection of the Christian religion saying "O Anna at the knobs of the panel oblong, / hear us at crossroads at the great hinges"<sup>60</sup>.

Like Okigbo, Awoonor denounces Christianity as a religion imposed by the colonizer and one of its catastrophic consequences is that it distorted the native religion and distanced the Africans from their

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<sup>54</sup> Labyrinths 4

<sup>55</sup> Nwoga 56

<sup>56</sup> Nwoga 57

<sup>57</sup> Labyrinths 5

<sup>58</sup> Edward Said 94

<sup>59</sup> Labyrinths 5

<sup>60</sup> Ibid 5

ancestral heritage. This attitude parallels what Ngugi believes *In Moving the Centre* when he points out that the consequences imposed on the colonized by imperialism includes cultural subjugation, distortion of peoples languages, history, religions, naming systems<sup>61</sup>. Hence, decolonization becomes a must as it could undo these dire consequences and help the Africans establish their new society.

In his outstanding poem "The Weaver Bird", Awoonor reveals his rejection to the missionary intrusion in Africa and particularly in Ghana. Awoonor believes that colonialism in general had the evil effects on Africa both on the economic and cultural levels. Thus he has a yearning for sustaining the beliefs of his tradition through regeneration in the neglected gods. The symbolism of the bird connotes anarchy and destruction caused by the colonizer:

The weaver bird built in our house

And laid its eggs on our only tree

We did not want to send it away

.....

.....

And the weaver returned in the guise of the owner<sup>62</sup>.

The speaker of the poem points out the attitude of the weaver bird which instead of showing appreciation for the kindness of the hosts, it defiles and desecrates their shrines and usurps their household. However in the final and concluding lines, Awoonor shows how local people strive to resist the influence of Christianity and preserve their religious heritage. The following lines suggest, by implication, that the indigenous religion for Africa has potency and guidance as Christianity and therefore there is no need for Africans to abandon it for a foreign faith imposed by an intruder:

But we cannot join the prayers and answers of the communicants

We look for new homes everyday

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<sup>61</sup> Ngugi 1993, 60

<sup>62</sup> Awoonor 1987, 21

For new altars we strive to rebuild

The old shrines defiled by the Weaver's excrement<sup>63</sup>

Modern African writers defend their native culture against alien and intruders' cultural practices by affirming their roots. Ojaide cites Okigbo's *Heavensgate* as an example "of the defence of the indigenous culture against the invading Western one"<sup>64</sup>. Okigbo uses negative images to describe alien culture in contrast to the positive ones describing African indigenous culture. By doing so, Okigbo asserts his cultural identity and condemning the European intervention and colonial prejudices. According to Ojaide "this is an affirmation of African religions which attempt to save lives rather than souls as alien Christianity is supposed to be doing"<sup>65</sup>

Looking at the poetry of Awoonor and Okigbo, one could see how the authors succeed in employing African oral traditions in their work as an important component of the African identity. They simply try to apply what Fanon termed as "the replacing of a certain 'species' of men by another 'species' of men"<sup>66</sup>. Whereas Awoonor makes use of Ewe oral traditions in his poetry involving the use of the Ewe dirge form, Okigbo succeeds in utilizing the Igbo indigenous religion as a means of enhancing self-assertion and African sensibility. Both writers tacitly represent Fanon's urgent need to connect with the ancestral heritage as a way of resuscitating their heroic past and connecting it to their present. This could be interpreted as a basic step towards having a true national culture deeply-rooted in history, capable of addressing the Africans and resisting the hegemony of the colonizer at the same time.

The poem "Songs of Sorrow" captures a style of poetry derived from Ewe dirges, laments and songs which support the idea that rediscovering the true African identity is Awoonor's main concern. The general mood here is that of the personal sense of loss dominant in the style of Akpalu's oral poetry. With regard to his own poetic development, Awoonor admits his indebtedness to Ewe dirge as developed by the old Ghanaian poet Akpalu. Awoonor himself acknowledges his fascination by the Ewe style

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid 21

<sup>64</sup> Tanure Ojaide 46

<sup>65</sup> Ibid 46

<sup>66</sup> Fanon 1963:35

that can be seen through his use of elegiac tone, exhortation, praise and prayer for those who have gone before:

Some of my earliest poetry was an attempt to take over from the dirge a series of segments or individual lines around which to create longer pieces that still express a close thematic and structural affinity with the original<sup>67</sup>.

Awoonor's use of the dirge form, as his personal song, is part of a tradition which he seeks to present in his work. In his book *The Breast of the Earth*, Awoonor said:

The Ewe dirge reveals the loneliness and sorrow of death, traditional world views of what the next stage of the journey is, and finally a message or prayer. The dead person is a traveler from the living to the ancestors; he is given intimate messages to deliver to those who had gone ahead.<sup>68</sup>

"Songs of Sorrow" is a good example of the conventions borrowed from Akpalu's dirge. Its emphasis is on the personal sense of loss expressed by the list of woes, the complaints about economics, reminiscent of the dead, the prayer and message. "Songs of Sorrow" laments the decaying cultural values due to foreign control but at the same time, it celebrates the poet's insistence on keeping those virtues endeared in his own Ewe society. In the first stanza, the poet laments his own fate which is one of utter hopelessness, restlessness and unfulfilled hope or aim he had ever cherished. Imagery in this section tends to create this atmosphere where we have the image of the man led into a forest full of sharp stumps and the image of wanderer who is lost in the primeval African forest where "returning is not possible/And going forward is a great difficulty"<sup>69</sup>. The poem's opening lines read:

Dzogbese Lisa has treated me thus

It has led me among the sharps of the forest

Returning is not possible

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<sup>67</sup> Awoonor 1975, 202

<sup>68</sup> *The Breast of the Earth* 83-84

<sup>69</sup> Awoonor 1975, 203

And going forward is a great difficulty  
The affairs of this world are like the chameleon faeces  
Into which I have stepped  
When I clean it cannot go  
I am on the world's extreme corner  
I am not sitting in the row with the eminent  
But those who are lucky  
Sit in the middle and forget  
I am on the world's extreme corner  
I can only go beyond and forget<sup>70</sup>.

The poet invokes the memory of several important individuals in the Ewe culture and Ewe society. As Awoonor explains Dzogbese Lisa refers to the Creator God or the Supreme Creator among the Ewe-speaking people. Kpeti, the founder and animator of the traditional society, is an example. Also, Nyidevu and Kove are the dead ancestors: "The emphasis here is on the belief that accompanies man at the point of his creation into the world and serves as his mission or destiny"<sup>71</sup>. Awoonor's appeal to those characters stresses his interest in preserving his culture from total extinction.

Reviving the national history is one of the weapons which Fanon recommends toward achieving true decolonization. For Fanon, the African writer should put an end to the history of colonization by putting the history of his nation into focus<sup>72</sup>. Likewise, Ngugi affirms the same conception of history as it records the struggle for change and at the same time the Africans can change the whole world by means of their history<sup>73</sup>.

Okigbo's poem "Lustra" seems to have more in common with Awoonor's poem "Songs of Sorrow". This poem is an emphasis on the

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<sup>70</sup> Awoonor 1975, 203

<sup>71</sup> Ibid 204

<sup>72</sup> Fanon 1963, 51

<sup>73</sup> Ngugi 1994, 107

poet's attempt to preserve traditional heritage in the face of the destructive encroachment of the Western tradition. Okigbo is mainly influenced by the rituals and sacrifices. As Anozie claims, the poem reflects the poet's resolution to purify himself <sup>74</sup>. Being alienated from the indigenous culture, the poet comes back like a prodigal searching for the moon goddess and wishing to be accepted from the goddess Idoto. The significance of the ritual offering on the part of the poet is stressed by Dan Izevbaye. He notes that "since the poet is technically a stranger, [he] require[s] ritual cleansing"<sup>75</sup>. Okigbo skillfully manipulates certain associations of images and symbols used for purification. He uses native symbols of purity as white hen and an egg. He says:

So would I from my eye the mist  
So would I  
thro moon mist to hilltop  
there for the cleansing  
Here is a new laid egg  
here a white hen at mid term<sup>76</sup>

Again, "palm grove" and "fingers of chalk" are ritual symbols intended to cause the poet's ascent toward acceptance and admission by the goddess:

Fingers of penitence bring  
to a palm grove  
vegetable offering with five  
fingers of chalk.....<sup>77</sup>.

As Fraser stresses the palm grove is where the spirits of the ancestors reside and by going to this tree, the poet is comforted by "a customary inscription of five, between man and ancestor, man and man, familiar in all Igbo households"<sup>78</sup>. Again the references to "Thundering drums and cannons" are symbols and images drawn from West African culture and

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<sup>74</sup> Sunday Anozie 1984, p. 52

<sup>75</sup> Charles A Bodunde 29

<sup>76</sup> Labyrinths 14

<sup>77</sup> Labyrinths 14

<sup>78</sup> Robert Fraser 112

heritage and they are concerned with traditional burial ceremony. Here they may refer to the moment of triumphant spiritual illumination. Finally, the prodigal, after showing penitence and respect and paying his offerings, is accepted and "the spirit {is} in the ascent"<sup>79</sup>.

To conclude, this paper has attempted to expose diverse views of decolonization as handled by Frantz Fanon and Ngugi wa Thiongo. The majority of their ideas revolve around the way writers can help the colonized get free from all kinds of subjugation, oppression and discrimination practiced by colonialist or neocolonialist powers. Their theory focuses on two pillars constituting the process of decolonization; resistance and nationalism. Resistance implies the cultural resistance maintained by African writers to resist stereotypical images imposed by Westerners. These images have long deprived many Africans of their authentic and true identity which necessitates the striving for national liberation on the part of African intellectuals. Nationalism on the other hand includes the attempts of those writers to preserve history and traditional heritage characterizing any group or society. Such cultural nationalism signifies many ways followed by writers to go deep into their past to recreate or rediscover their African identity by way of decolonization.

Moreover, the paper has shown how the work of Awoonor and Okigbo is a manifestation of the West African traditions they sought to cherish. The selected poems have revealed how far they successfully have tried to rediscover their true African identity through clinging to their African heritage. However the comparison exposes that while Awoonor deals with themes and style of his Ewe oral tradition, Okigbo seeks to achieve this aim through the invocation of his indigenous Igbo religion. It also shows that both poets had cultural decolonization as an implicit goal that could be achieved through their literary writings. The realization of this common goal can be touched through their resistance to the ideas, images and practices imposed by the colonizer. In addition, they have stressed the need to establish a strong connection with the past in order to have an independent national African identity capable of facing the challenges of the present neocolonialism.

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<sup>79</sup> Labyrinths 16

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