

## ***The Cathedral* by Kofi Awoonor**

On this dirty patch  
a tree once stood  
shedding incense on the infant corn:  
its boughs stretched across a heaven  
brightened by the last fires of a tribe.  
They sent surveyors and builders  
who cut that tree  
planting in its place  
A huge senseless cathedral of doom.

Awoonor, Kofi, 'The Cathedral' in *Rediscovery and Other Poems* (Ibadan: Mbari Publications, 1964).

*The Cathedral* by Ghanaian writer Kofi Awoonor is a result of African colonisation and forced Christianisation from European, primarily British, colonising powers. Awoonor's poetry was a product of migration and renewal with his formative years being spent under British rule.<sup>1</sup> *The Cathedral* was written at a time when Ghanaians were reclaiming their intellectual and social independence from imperialism after becoming independent in 1957 and addressing how their identity got lost throughout the century. The poem addresses forced missionary work and the spread of Western industrialisation and apparent 'modernity' in spite of (or perhaps, because of) Ghana's indigenous peoples.

Awoonor pens an extended metaphor of imperialism through missionaries in the literal description of *The Cathedral*. Europeans wielded Christianity as a militia tool using it as a point of persuasion in the conversion of the African people.<sup>2</sup> Awoonor conveys this message through his description of said Cathedral: it is one of 'doom'.<sup>3</sup> Here the poet deliberately exercises the use of Biblical lexicon whilst also denouncing it. The connotations of doom are

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<sup>1</sup> Sigma Fatima Jagne, Pushpa Parekh, *Postcolonial African Writers: A Bio-bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Nathan Nunn, 'Religious Conversion in Colonial Africa', *American Economic Review* 100 (2010), pp. 147 – 152, (p. 147).

<sup>3</sup> Kofi Awoonor, *Rediscovery and Other Poems*, (Mbari Publications, 1964), 9.

wrapped up within Revelations-style brutality and apocalyptic revenge by God. To use this against Christianity serves only to reveal Awoonor's true feelings about the religion within his native country: he saw it as a curse and something to be destroyed and thus made new again with the second coming of Jesus. Only the resurrection of Jesus is this time the rebirth of Ghana's Ewe tradition – the author's faith. This is reflected and extrapolated on by the poet within stanza 3.<sup>4</sup> By including incense; something so significantly holy to his people [the Ewe] and positioning it against corn in infancy works to connote his nationalist belief that what was once a Kingdom within its own right, was snuffed out in its fruition to be the British Gold Coast.<sup>5</sup>

Awoonor's piece also begins to explore the lack of a Ghanaian voice to the colonisers as the poem does not possess a narrator, only Awoonor's voice itself speaks. The piece was published in the late 1960s, a time in which the intellectual public was reclaiming their nation's historiography through nationalist sentiment.<sup>6</sup> This then may be the explanation for the lack of narrative voice – Awoonor wants to speak his truth and give his people (both the Ewe and Ghanaians at large) their voice back after so long without it. Within this, however, Awoonor depicts analogies that can be construed as both offensive and patriotic. His irreverent denunciation of Western ideology and persistence of Ewe religion – which is based on cosmogonic principles rather than a one-God faith – carries a two-fold implication.<sup>7</sup> With the Christian population of Ghana [68.8%] overwhelming that of either Islam or traditional religion, the former being 15.9% and the latter 8.5%, Awoonor could be read as causing (perhaps inadvertent) offence to his country fellows who converted through the forced use of missionaries by the Europeans.<sup>8</sup> While Awoonor does not explicitly blame the natives, who were duped by the British use of Christianity as a means of education or a mutually-beneficial arrangement rather than a means of oppression, the poem could appear to be combative rather than empathetic.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Awoonor, *Recovery*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Kofi Awoonor, 'Nationalism: Masks and Consciousness', *Books Abroad* 2 (1971), pp. 207 – 211 (p. 211).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Strayer, 'Mission History in Africa: New Perspectives on an Encounter', *African Studies Review* 19 (1976), pp. 01 – 15 (p. 01).

<sup>7</sup> Anthony B. Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience: Toward a Comparative Black Theology* (Fortress Press, 1997), p. 05.

<sup>8</sup> Unknown, 'Adherent Statistics of World Religions by Country', 13<sup>th</sup> November 2010, <http://www.religionfacts.com/charts/adherents-by-country> [accessed on 13/10/2018].

<sup>9</sup> Nunn, 'Religious Conversion', p. 148.

However, this could be expected from an author who spent his developmental years under white colonial and oppressive rule; being both a source of income for the British Crown and a source of hatred. Moreover, Awoonor's education in studying for both an MA and PhD in the United Kingdom and the United States of America respectively gives the author's grievances a form of legitimacy. This reveals itself in Christianity's inherent prominence, yet Awoonor's well-travelled education enables him, in the minds of his peers, to showcase these views as a form of reclaiming national identity which could undercut any such criticism.

Christianity within the African continent is a deeply complex form of ideology. With most forms of modernisation culminating through human suffering (exemplified in Soviet Russia), Awoonor deplores the passing of his tribal nation to more collectivised forms of nation-states.<sup>10</sup> The poet uses the verb to plant when speaking of the Cathedral's birth, and thus the spread of Christianity.<sup>11</sup> Rather than use another lexical choice to express the assembling of something new, Awoonor uses a word with linguistic connotations of something taking root. This 'root' then takes its time to grow and manifest into what we can now call the Cathedral. Resultingly, Awoonor may be trying to convey how once something is planted in place of another, it will take a long time to eradicate it – this eradication is only being precipitated by some form of industrialisation or modernity. Said modernity was then taken by the British and their 'surveyors and builders' which meant Ghana lost its chance at reclaiming its Ewe identity back and will now be a Christian state indefinitely, much to his lament.<sup>12</sup>

This source commentary has begun to formulate the ideas of Ghanaian national identity to its intellectual community, but also to the larger Christian public. Awoonor manages to create the sense of British rule through forced missionaries, but also the wider impact of how the country obtained their independence. This is also alongside their progression as an independent state in spite of a religion that was forced upon them and how they reconcile that to their modern identity.

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<sup>10</sup> Awoonor, *Rediscovery*, 5, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Awoonor, *Rediscovery*, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Awoonor, *Rediscovery*, 6.