

Is God African, or Is God for Africa? The Locus of Otherisation in Intercultural Communication in Nkemngong Nkengasong's *God was African*

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Abstract

*This paper examines the problems of stereotyping and acceptance in intercultural communication. Using *God was African* by Nkemngong Nkengasong, it assesses the extent to which the image of God and the different manifestations of belief systems in cultural and religious authorization become the locus of categorization which is responsible for many conflicts in human societies. Using the cultural approach within the postcolonial field of study, the paper hypothesizes that the problems of intercultural communication in the novel arise due to the character's inability to create a unique identity for God across world cultures from a functionalist perspective. Through Otherisation therefore, intercultural communication is plagued by conflicts of stereotyping, prejudices, ethnic reductionism, and culturicism with each determining the degree of tolerance and integration of the foreign other mostly for egoistic reasons. The different levels of culture shock experienced by Kendem in *God was African* therefore becoming Nkengasong's contribution to the ongoing negotiation process for a universal acceptance of human races and belief systems in a multicultural world.*

Keywords: authorization, intercultural communication, stereotyping, prejudices, ethnic reductionism, foreign other, and culturalism.

Introduction

The color was an important project in God's design for the world, to create a harmony of different colours just like the rainbow. The world should celebrate variety, and not despise it. (194)

The conception of God and belief systems between the West and Africa remain a point of contention given that religious imperialism in its discriminatory agenda rejected everything that was non-Western. With the passage of time and an increase in the level of literacy, national and international migrations have facilitated intercultural communication within the context of globalization and this has opened up new perspectives and conflicts between peoples, cultures, and belief systems. Nkemngong Nkengasong's *God was African* is a fictional comparison of Kendem's experiences in the United States of America vis-à-vis his Lewoh culture and how the perception of the foreign other lends to socio-cultural and religious conflicts. The major cause of these conflicts is psychological whether to accept a foreign religion and culture or not. This psychological problem is foregrounded in the conversation between Bombabili and Kendem when the former reminds the latter about the importance of the Lewoh gods:

We have many gods, one big one... Fuondem is the big god and many small gods. Small gods accommodate in the forest and the hill like Nyimbong, and in the rock, and the valley, and in the waterfall like Lebialem. When I am hungry I gallivant to the forest and harvest the fruit and eat. When I want to drink water, I gallivant to Ntsembeuh and drink water. Why do you think that I should not give goat and palm wine to the god who lives in the forest and in the water and the waterfall who gives me everything? If I were accommodated in the desert, would I not thank god for giving me so many sands and so many sun lights? (sic, 129)

This conversation which comes up after Kendem's return from America where he observes first-hand, the real face of Christianity in its origin makes him interrogate the hypocrisy behind the propaganda imposed on the Third World through religious colonisation. From a cultural and functionalist perspective, Christianity's prejudice and stereotyping of Lewoh gods succeeded in the past only because the people were illiterates who saw the image of God in the white man and the

white man exploited their ignorance in every possible way. An ideology criticized by Stephen Fuchs in *Against Essentialism: A Theory of Culture and Society* when he opines that:

It is not the nature of religion to disregard evidence from empirical observations. Far from it. On the contrary, the intellectual wing of religion likely responds and reacts to the observations that science makes when those observations concern religion's turf and domain. But the religion likely renormalizes a scientific observation into its networks and culture. This means that some observations or findings might not have the same status in the networks of religion as it does in the networks of science [...]. A religion does with it what it can do to maintain its own identity and internal coherence. (53)

From Fuchs's perspective, that is why Christianity imposes its network in Lewoh and bans everything about their tradition. Kendem's experiences will reveal everybody's quest to maintain this internal coherence and identity. Also, Kendem realizes that these lead to problems of race, class, and ethnicity which continuously hamper intercultural communication nationally and internationally. It therefore becomes necessary to construct and articulate identities.

Constructing Cultural and Religious Identity

The creation myth in the *Holy Bible* which talks about the different earthly bodies is interpreted differently in different cultures and religions. Generally, there is a supreme God in all cultures and religions and there are minor gods in many cultures that reside in the different earthly bodies. The identity of these minor gods and their acceptance and recognition continue to be problematic with the advent of globalization and religious expansionism. Adherence to these gods defines cultural identity, which is why I find Stuart Hall's definition in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" important for this paper. To Hall, cultural identity is broad because:

There are at least two different ways of thinking about 'cultural Identity.' The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes that provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging, and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. (223)

To Hall, therefore, the binding force underlying all superficial differences is the truth and the essence. It is this identity that Kendem and the black diaspora must discover, excavate, bring to light, and express through different representations. This construction of cultural identity played a critical role in the post-colonial struggles that have so profoundly reshaped our world. The Lewoh society in Nkemngong Nkengasong's *God was African* is a theatre for religious conflict between Christianity and tradition as Christianity struggles to implant its identity by otherizing traditional worship. Through Kendem's encounters with the different characters in the novel, we see these religious clashes as natives try to re-establish the identities of their gods that Christianity deceived them to destroy. His encounter with Bombabili who regrets ever neglecting his tradition and later justifies his argument that God was African as he says:

Only one-on-one time now, not as long time ago before you pipe came and built your juju house and put your juju in the house. And you pipe force us to burn our jujus. We did know what we were doing and we put our jujus in the fire and burned it. Is only after that we know that God was African. Let me tell you again to and fro that God was African. And yet your pipe says that our god was satanic and that our culture was barbaric. And yet we did hammer our god on the

cross. We didn't beat him to death. You see, we were not barbaric to our god. We show love to our god. (sic, 129)

To Bombabili, Europeans should not accuse Africans of barbarism. The killing of Christ is abominable because people do not kill their gods. To celebrate Lewoh gods Kendem's description of the different sacred rivers, hills, valleys, and forests with Bombabili on their way to Beyano village reveals the presence of gods believed to be the protectors of these villages which makes us understand why the villagers perform yearly sacrifices to them. Through the existence of peace, good harvest, and fecundity, it is evident to the Lewoh people that God is African. Bombabili describes the rituals performed by their chief thus:

Every year they offer offertory. Every year they dance and dance and kill goats and swine. Then they will make the *lunging* medicine when the big *ngangafu*... the traditional pipu wul meet in the palace and make the *lekat*. The villager brings their farm tool and the seeds on the last day so that the big *ngangafu* would bless them. (sic, 128)

While these seeds are planted in their farms, the *ngangafu* (traditional spiritual leaders) prepare some of the seeds that are planted along the boundaries of the village to send away evil spirits that may hamper the peace and harmony of the village. These celebrate and protect their cultural identity which Brian Fay considers to be the basic belief system in *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science: A Multicultural Approach* that:

According to a standard view, a culture is a complex set of shared beliefs, values, and concepts that enables a group to make sense of its life and provides it with directions for how to live. This set might be called a basic belief system [...]. In perhaps the most influential variant of this standard view, culture is pictured as a text the vocabulary and grammar of which its members learn. Indeed, in this view, becoming a member of a particular culture is a

process of enculturation conceived as learning to read the culture's basic text and making it one's own. (55-60)

Looking at Lewoh culture from Fay's definition, one understands why Kendem says rituals to the village gods are supported by family rituals performed by their different ancestors. It is important to note that although Kendem comes from a devout Catholic family, his parents have never failed to perform rituals for their ancestors in the shrine built behind their house. Their reason is to preserve the identity of their ancestors whose spirits continue to intercede for them with the supreme Lewoh god. Kendem describes the items in the family shrine thus:

Inside the shrine were odd pieces of furniture. Beads and cowry shells were placed in a cyclic pattern on raised earth that looked like an altar. At the foot of the raised earth stood a carved wooden stool, parts of which had been eaten by termites. Directly in front of my father near the rear wall was a line of clay pots covered on the earth. A carved wooden staff leaned on a far angle of the wall. (116)

These pots symbolize different ancestors whose "heads" receive the sacrificial food and drink. It is in this shrine that all the spiritual issues of the Kendem family are settled. The father has to bring the family into the shrine with Kendem's elder brother in front as an initiation rite into these spiritual practices as his heir. Ironically, Kendem's education and travels in America instead confuse him about the true identity of God. Looking at the communal life of Lewoh and their traditional practices and beliefs, vis-à-vis Western teachings and Christianity, he finds it hard to create a unique identity for himself and God. He explains his psychological trauma in the following lines:

Something was missing in me which my mother and Bombabili seemed to perceive faster than I did [...]. My experiences in the U.S. proved just that, that I was a child of the world who should be defined by my native values. These values were enshrined in the place

where my mother delivered me and to which she probably wanted me to pay allegiance. (115)

Kendem's mother and Bombabili realize that with his education, he has rejected his ancestral practices for Christianity. Though a devoted Christian, his mother believes in her traditional practices which is why she insists that Kendem visits his late father and the other ancestors in the shrine. She believes that the ancestors are angry with the family given that his elder brother who is heir has traveled to America and abandoned the traditional rituals of the family, leaving the family vulnerable to spiritual attacks.

Her belief is justified because she sees the spirit of her late husband looking dejected in her dreams, signaling an impending doom for the family. After all, the ancestors have been left unattended. Her insistence that as a second son, Kendem's visits to the shrine will appease the ancestors, which is why she instructs him on what to do when he visits the shrine as she says:

When you enter the shrine, go towards the last clay pot. That is the one that covers the head of your father. It is the last on your right as you enter. Tell him you have come to greet him and all the ancestors. Ask him to intercede for you in your struggle through life, to assist you in achieving your desires. After that take a bit of earth around the clay pot and rub it on your chest. (123)

Kendem needs to do this to connect with his ancestors whom he has abandoned for a long time like his brother in America. His mother thinks that the problems his brother faces in America are a consequence of the wrath of the gods back home which is why she concludes that "we shall not wait until there is calamity before we start racing across the countryside to look for solutions" (249). Therefore, if Kendem does not reconcile his identity with his ancestors, more calamity will befall the entire family.

Here we see the importance of asserting cultural identity in intercultural discourse. Kendem's different experiences have

only helped to alienate him from his true cultural identity because his Christian teachings about a foreign God make him see the Lewoh tradition as primitive and the West as a paradise where God is closest to the people. These thoughts usually harbor the minds of young Christians in Africa because it is the agenda behind religious colonization. That is why when he gets the opportunity to go to America and attend church services there, Kendem believes that will purify himself of his primitive African ancestral worship as he opines:

I yearned to worship in a foreign church where Christianity was at its best expression. I believed I was going to meet with the essential sacrament uncontaminated with fossilized cultural constraints that kept Africa always backward in terms of development. (60)

This idea comes from Kendem's background as a Christian boy in Lewoh where he served mass under Father Tom and later went to study in a prestigious Catholic school. Also, the fact that all priests he knew as a child were whites made him see God and Christ as whites as Christianity still paints them. Unfortunately, when he gets to America, he sees the opposite of what is taught in Africa. People are not interested in going to church on Sunday as is always the case in Africa as he tells us that:

I asked some of my acquaintances if anyone was interested in accompanying me to church the following day. Some of them looked at me as if I had lost my senses. Others planned instead to attend a concert, a film, or an opera show. Joda was a Muslim although I had not seen him pray often as was the case with those of that religion back in my country. Neither did I hear him talking about going to the mosque. (71)

This marks the beginning of Kendem's culture shock as he finds it difficult to understand why many people in Washington are not interested in going to church. When he finally attends the church of St. Joseph in Manhattan, he is shocked to find only

very few old people in the church and a few children. After inquiries, he is told that many people go to church only when they feel insecure like after the September 9-eleven terrorist attacks. He is also shocked by the fact that Americans have more faith in their government and system than in God, which is not the case back in his country where everyone believes in God than in the system. These shocking experiences push Kendem to understand that one's cultural identity is more important in defining oneself than a borrowed identity you can't define. This confirms why Bombabili boasts about his identity as a true son of Lewoh because he has built his thatch roof house when he says:

Even though they are a thatched house, I live in it with my three wives and my children. I owe nobody. I am not a vagabond. I am satisfied with what I have. I am a proud Lewoh man. When you people talk about the beautiful place you have to go to, I talk about the beautiful place I was born to. I was born in Lewoh, I have traveled to Lewoh. Lewoh is the capital city. (sic, 42)

Asserting such cultural identity is what Kendem is still unable to do because of his knowledge of the world which has ironically distanced him from his roots. Kendem is not yet in control of the resources that make up his cultural identity and ethnicity to be able to influence others' perceptions of his identity. His identity is an essential concept he needs to build through the skilled manipulation of cultural discourses as Adrian Holliday, Martin Hyde, and John Kullman posit in *Intercultural Communication: An Advanced Resource Book*:

We tend to defend our cultural inheritance as the norm and see other modes of existence as mistaken. This perhaps natural reaction to difference is something we need to be wary of and try to overcome, for, in effect, there is no blueprint or copyright to existence and there are always interesting things to be found and learned in the ways other communities manage their existence. Different communities have come up with different solutions to the challenges of

communal existence within the environments in which they exist. Your cultural milieu – the one that you feel you belong to – is but one attempted solution. (189)

Kendem understands that the greatest problem in defending cultural inheritance is that some people profess that their vision of how life is to be lived is the correct way and that other ways are aberrations. This is the ideology that Christianity brought to Lewoh country which leads to intolerance and, of course, to conflict. As such, Holliday, Hyde, and Kullman conclude that rather than reject the way other communities live and the values they have learned to subscribe to, another way forward is to try to understand and learn what one can from these different cultural outlooks. At this point, we realize that Kendem's quest for identity coincides with a serious problem in Lewoh about deciding the appropriate funeral for Fuo Beyano, one of the chiefs and custodians of the Lewoh tradition who later converted to Christianity and left the family and community in confusion as to his successor and funeral.

The conflict over the burial of Fuo Beyano is a very complicated one. This is because the ancestors of the Beyano family were the conquerors who established the village there and were also custodians of Lewoh culture. With modernism, therefore, Fuo Beyano, one of the leading pillars and kingmakers of Lewoh Christianised and otherised aspects of tradition. This divided his family because some of his wives and children joined the church while others stuck to their traditions. Upon his death, some of his children, in compliance with the church keep his corpse in the morgue and plan a Christian burial for him. This family quarrel drags for too long and also divides the council of ruling chiefs until *Atemangwat*, (the paramount chief) decides to put an end to this imbroglio. Ironically, Fuo Beyano's traditional status in Lewoh country requires that he be buried with all traditional rituals to facilitate his passage to the ancestors even though he had joined the Catholic Church. That's why the Paramount chief concludes that:

Lewoh culture and its traditions have to be protected without which we cannot talk of the nerve and soul of our land [...]. The laws and customs of Lewoh were not

made today. They were made by our forefathers a long time ago and they knew what they were doing [...]. Fuo Beyano's great-grandfather was one of the earliest chiefs to settle in the land. He fought and conquered territory from Leki and we cannot now say that we will allow strangers to bury him. Where will he meet his ancestors? Who will appease his ancestors when things go sour in Beyano village? Will the church perform the traditional rites that will permit him to travel to the ancestral world? Will the church catch his successor and perform the rites that will link him with his ancestors and give him the benevolence of a good ruler? There is much wisdom in the ways of our ancestors and we cannot now allow Leki people to take back our land. We shall practice tradition as our forefathers designed it... (150-151)

This decision by the paramount chief reduces Christianity to the foreign other puts an end to this long-standing quarrel and asserts the identity of Lewoh tradition at a time when Christianity and modernism are fast eating into Lewoh local life. With this, the corpse of the Fuo Beyano is seized from the family and buried by the Paramount Chief and the ruling council in the inner shrine, respecting all the rites that tradition demands.

By Lewoh tradition, after the burial, the successor to the Beyano chieftaincy is designated by the chief, respecting the will of the late Fuo Beyano after swearing an oath of truth in the shrine of the gods of Lewoh country. This is to avoid situations of bribery and corruption because, in such an event, the vengeance of the gods and ancestors is evoked immediately. To appease the gods and preserve the identity of the Beyano family, the chief priest leads the newly enthroned chief of the Beyano village and his cabinet to the ancestral shrine in the heart of the sacred grove with all the needed items for the initiation ritual as the narrator describes the chief priest's incantations:

gods of our ancestors, we the descendants of Fuo Beyano have come to greet you and to present our new chief and his retinue. Our chief left us and we are happy that he has returned. We have come to show

him and the ruling house to you and to ask for your blessings on their heads. We ask you to guide the new chief. Give him wisdom and the courage to rule, give him many wives and many children who will continue to spread your seed in the world. Soften his mind with humility for as our forefathers said; if you have never eaten soil then you will never know how the soil tastes in poor people's mouths. Fathers and mothers commend us to the gods of the household of Fuo Beyano, to Ndemallah and Fuondem the most terrific, the most powerful. Raise your heads from the earth and deliver us from those who have evil minds towards us. (281)

With his enthronement, the new chief spends seven weeks in the inner sections of the Paramount Chief's palace where the other kingmakers groom him on the customs and traditions of Lewoh country and how he is supposed to rule his village. A new wife is also given to him alongside the wives of his late father whom he is supposed to inherit as tradition demands. According to Lewoh culture, the new chief and his bride will come out of the seven weeks of seclusion with her pregnant son which will mark the beginning of his family line as the new Fuo Beyano. As part of the people present in the shrine during the ritual, Kendem discovers his cultural identity which is why he is initiated into the cult of notables because his level of education and experiences around the world is necessary in understanding the place of tradition in a world that is fast modernizing. As a hybrid, Kendem understands why God is African according to the people of Lewoh country.

Intercultural Politics and Authorisation

In this section, I will examine the different perspectives from which Nkemngong represents the foreign other in intercultural communication both in Lewoh and in America. Authorisation is a form of prejudice because according to Stuart Hall:

This 'look', from - so to speak - the place of the Other, fixes us, not only in its violence, hostility, and

aggression but in the ambivalence of its desire. This brings us face, to face, not simply with the dominating European presence as the site or 'scene' of integration where those other presences which it had actively disaggregated were recomposed - reframed, put together in a new way; but as the site of a profound splitting and doubling - what Homi Bhaba has called 'the ambivalent identifications of the racist world . . . the otherness' of the self-inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity. (233)

Hall discusses cultural Otherisation from the perspective of Homi Bhaba in *Location of Culture* where he examines the imposition of Western modes of life on post-colonial cultures. The conflict between Christianity and tradition in Lewoh country is based on the consideration of one another as the 'other.' Religious colonization paints Lewoh culture and belief systems as barbaric and satanic, just as tradition sees the politics behind Christianity as a means to uproot them from their ancestral practices and gods. Through Kendem's mother who is a Christian, Kendem understands the different means used by the church to break many polygamous marriages as Kendem says:

She was an early Christian of the Roman Catholic Church when it was first established in Lewoh country. Being the first of my father's five wives, she was quick to find favour with the priest who generally discouraged polygamous marriages and did not welcome any person involved in polygamy to belong to the church. The church preached one man, one wife [...]. She made mention of a chief who had abandoned his twelve wives after baptism and got married to a woman who also accepted baptism. Many others did the same before they were admitted to the church. (20)

The politics of the church on monogamy is not appreciated in Lewoh country because according to their traditional practices, polygamy is a sign of wealth and manhood. Christianity's influence in Lewoh brings discord in many families especially when chiefs start going to church like the late Fuo Beyano whose

family is divided over the type of burial for him. Just as Father Tom insists on monogamy, he equally refuses traditional *Nweh* songs to be sung in church as he calls them 'pagan songs' and imposes Latin songs that the Christians sing without even understanding the meanings. That is why when in search of true paradise, Kendem goes to church in America only to discover how Africans are deceived into believing that their gods are satanic, meanwhile the true God is in Africa.

Furthermore, otherisation is seen through Western conceptions of marriages and polygamy in many African cultures. Through Kendem's conversation in the minivan with Dom Tomson, his wife, and the other pilgrims as they drive through Lowell, Massachusetts, everyone is shocked to hear that many men in Africa prefer polygamy. It instills a type of social balance as Kendem says:

Polygamy ensures that every woman has a husband. And that's safer. Single persons are more serious agents of transmission [...]. In monogamy, there is always an extramarital affair somewhere along the line [...]. Female population far exceeds that of men [...]. Thus polygamy seems to solve a big social problem in Africa. Imagine that the world population reads sixty percent men and forty percent women. (100-101)

This ideology is shocking to the other pilgrims especially as they think with polygamy, women's rights are disregarded in Africa. Despite Kendem's arguments that in polygamy, women are more effective and reliable managers and partners who earn respect from their husbands, the pilgrims see this as a form of slavery. Don Tomson sides with Kendem and explains that more than seventy percent of divorces in America are caused by marital disagreement because women ask for equal rights with their husbands or at times marriages are based on contracts. Kendem further realizes that the politics of marriages and divorces in America for foreigners is to get their papers. This is the case with his elder brother who disappears in America and is completely cut off from his family and traditional responsibilities back in Lewoh. After investigations, Kendem realizes that marriages in America are complicated as his brother tells him in a letter:

He said he was married to a white girl, had bought an apartment, and was looking forward to coming home to start a lucrative business [...]. He sent words that his passport was missing and that as soon as he had a new passport he would be coming [...]. Even then, he was thinking of divorcing his white wife with whom he had contracted a marriage to obtain a green card. (55)

Kendem's realization of the politics behind his brother's intercultural marriage is so shocking that he finds it difficult to tell his mother the truth about her son who is lost in America. He knows that the truth may kill her which is why he prefers to hide it from her. Here, we see that part of the politics of Otherisation is grounded on exploitation as such marriages are not based on true love like in Lewoh country, but for self-interest.

Moreover, for those who do not consider marriage or having a partner as an option in life, technological advancements in America are solving their emotional problems. Kendem is shocked when he enters a shop in Manhattan named 'Forbidden Eden' and notices that the items sold are of particular importance. He declares thus:

I first came across a young man who was roughly thirty years of age. He had an object in his hand which he examined with such passionate intensity. I looked closely and realized that it was an artificial female organ [...]. I moved a little further and came across a young lady. She was slightly above twenty-five, holding a mega dildo in her left hand, her fingers barely going around three-quarters of its circumference. I stopped for a while and looked at the phallic object in her hand. (186-187)

The name of the shop 'Forbidden Eden' is ironical from the biblical notion of heaven in Christianity which is why Kendem finds this experience shocking these two youths are of marriageable ages and he can't understand why they prefer sex toys to humans because, in Lewoh, they would be happily married and with children. Moreover, he is told that there is a queer league in America that organizes annual celebrations on

the 23rd Street on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. His shock is compounded by the fact that thousands of gays and lesbians participate in this festivity in erotic outfits carrying placards reading 'Ban the Churches for Turning Down Gay Job Applicants' (188) and many other demands. At this point, he concludes that God's plan for the world has been altered by humans given that marriage and children are not an important issue in America as in Lewoh. Africans still respect the laws of marriage which can be concluded that God is African.

Furthermore, just as most gays and blacks are segregated, the Native Americans (red Indians) are politically side-lined by mainstream American white society. Despite their education and quest for social inclusion, they continue to be authorised as Kendem describes Professor Maiara Tamaya who receives and gives them a lecture in Santa Fe:

She talked to us about Indian religious beliefs and education, refusing to answer questions related to the status of the Native Americans in the socio-political setup of the United States and questions that attempted to poke deep into the religious beliefs of the people [...]. Maiara's looks and tone continued to force their imprint on the mind, with the expression of some profound mystery in her being, some *wahala* that she and her race had borne with stigma from the beginning of time or some inexplicable incident in history when something terrible happened; something terrible for which they needed an apology or were waiting for the spirits and the gods of the land to make a special declaration, take special action, to give a special benediction which their nation hoped to achieve through belief, ritual, and art. (164)

White cultural reductionism is what angers Maiara and other red Indians who have seen their lands seized, their traditional ways of life, and belief systems diluted and otherised by mainstream white society and politics and feel extinct as a people. The case of the Red Indians is not different from that of Africa in general. Ironically, many academics out of Africa argue that Africa is very poor even if they have never been to Africa to

match their hypotheses with evidence on the ground. This is the case with Professor McDonough, an economist at New York University who gives a talk to the pilgrims on the topic 'Poverty in America: Individualism and American Business Enterprise.' What surprises Kendem is his declaration that "Africa is very poor ... Only a few people can afford to eat one good meal a day" (108). When questioned by Kendem whether he has ever been to Africa, his sarcastic response is "Of course, I don't need to go to Africa to know about the continent. . . I mean, everyone knows that Africa is a poor continent" (ibid). Listening to such declarations about Africa makes Kendem angry because he knows the politics of authorization that the West uses to paint the foreign other. Kendem's response is also sarcastic as he says:

Even if Africa were poor, anyone could be violating the rights of the poor by giving the issue so much articulation and without providing concrete solutions to the problem [...]. The Western media always projected terrifying images of Africa to entertain the Western audience. And any scientific investigations based on those reports could produce devastating results. That is why Africa suffers. (109-110)

Kendem's response further reveals the hidden politics behind the supposed poverty of Africa because the numerous international NGOs who produce images of dilapidating societies, war, famine, etc. in Africa ask for funding that never comes to these societies. Furthermore, most of the wars in Africa are sponsored by Western arms dealers who need potential markets for their arms, and in exchange, the warlords pay for gold, diamonds, and other minerals. Even though Professor McDonough tries to communicate about Africa's pain, he cannot feel the pain as an outsider as Stephan Fuchs further explains:

Communication about pain is not itself physically painful. Communication travels along its networks so that only those to whom one is linked can observe one's communicated pain, even though they still cannot feel it. Pain reaches a larger audience only through organizations and their extended networks.

The pain is then no longer a physical sensation, but a communication phrased according to the operations of social structures. In this process, the pain becomes something different entirely. For example, it metamorphoses from the physical sensation of a body into statistics about torture, international political drama, accusations of injustice and human rights violations, and Amnesty International fundraisers. (24)

Fuchs's analysis shows that people like Professor McDonough are constantly fed images of the foreign Other by television, radio, and the press, in the explicit form of news, documentaries, and current affairs discussion. These reports describe Africa with graphic visual material like images of poor people and places to manipulate sentiments for selfish reasons.

Moreover, the ideas of Professor McDonough are not different from those of Eugenic White in another panel discussion on the topic 'Ethnicity, Race and Gender in American Politics.' White discusses the classification of different races in the world and concludes that "In fact, blacks are unclassified if one has to look at it from the purity of races" (192). This conclusion is based on the authorization of non-white races and the complete elimination of blacks. Kendem finds this surprising and interrogates White's motivation and criteria as he says:

You said a while ago that the black race is unclassified. But I remember that before slavery was abolished, blacks in America were classified as slaves. Don't you think that it is questionable today to say blacks are unclassified, about two centuries after the abolition of slavery and after racist mentalities have long been cleansed with more global concerns for the respect of individual rights and liberties, a cause which the United States has long championed? (192-193)

Kendem's questions mean nothing to whites because many believe that no matter how hard the blacks work or fight for their rights, they remain less human in the eyes of some whites. Kendem is further disappointed when they visit Columbia

University for another talk by Professor Brian Buff. He is a professor of Black History and his talk is on 'Black Migration and its Impact on the Bronx.' His lecture on the Bronx neighborhood paints the black settlement as dirty, corrupt, and risky because blacks are beasts. In his opinion, the treatment given to blacks in Harlem was justified because nothing good could come from the black race. Kendem's disappointment is manifested when he thinks about the sacrifices of the blacks in the different plantations and industries as slaves and whose sweat is responsible for the successes and plenty that abound in America today. Such prejudice against blacks reveals a deep-seated cultural fundamentalism, one satirized by Ulf Hannerz in "Reflections of Varieties of Culturespeak" that:

May develop in different contexts, shaping themselves to meet different requirements, and they need not all be malignant. I mentioned above the concept of 'culture shock', diffusing widely in the late 20th century as a way of referring to the kind of emotional and intellectual unease that sometimes occurs in encounters with unfamiliar meanings and practices.
(393)

To overcome Kendem's culture shock, Hannerz proposes a "culture shock prevention industry" made up of "interculturalists" who are professionals that can train, consult, and teach sensitivity about cultural diversity to various audiences through lectures, simulation games, videos, practical handbooks and some variety of other means. Kendem falls within such category of "interculturalists" which is why he argues that these slaves were uprooted and brought to a strange land and forced to work for long hours and under impossible conditions. Today, their sacrifices are disregarded and they are unclassified even by intellectuals who are supposed to be impartial and scientific in their analyses of the human race. That has been, and will continue to be the image of the blacks in the minds of some whites like Dos Santos.

Dos Santos is one of the pilgrims on the Fulbright program who despises Kendem because he is black. The way he addresses Kendem on issues about Africa shows that blacks are

not different from monkeys seen when he asks, "Ken, do you have roads in your country? [...] How do you move around? (92-93). Such questions reveal the degree of disgust for blacks and confirm his deep-seated politics of authorization. Kendem's sarcastic response to Dos Santos is pertinent because he places him on the same axis as the African monkey when he says, "No, I said... We skip from tree to tree until we reach our destinations... And your country's ambassador is an excellent tree climber. A good skipper too. He occupies one of the biggest trees in the capital city" (93). Kendem wonders whether it is ignorance about Africa or mere insults and ridicule for his personality. Ironically, Dos Santos falls within the same category of Western intellectuals who do not classify blacks in the racial ranking. Kendem concludes that everyone around him is pretending and that he is hated by many because he speaks the truth every time:

I had come to discover that people everywhere were not happy when one was open and frank [...]. I had never known how to be political. I had the ideas and spoke them straight. Truth mattered more to me than anything else. Yet not many people were friendly with the truth. I had found myself side-lined because I could not play the common game of giving wrong impressions, of saying things that are pleasing to the ears but at the very basis of it, it was cutting off the roots. That was the direction towards which the world was drifting, leaving me in a chaotic uprightness. (234-235)

Kendem believes that the role of the intellectual is to speak the truth at all times. He is shocked by the lies told around him about Africa and the black race, especially by researchers whom he expects should edify the world based on scientific truth. These lies are compounded when he meets black migrants like his brother whom he sees frustration all over but who continues to insist that everything is fine in America. He concludes that in a system built on lies telling, everyone within pretends to be okay and the foreign other is the only one that is suffering. That is how Kendem sees America and all the whites who segregate the black race and Africa.

Negotiating the Other in Intercultural Communication

There was an urgency for peace in the world. Peace, I say, if only human civilizations begin to see the difference as a blessing from God not as anathema, to see the difference in skin colour, sex, religion, and culture as the immutable design by God to endow upon the world the riches of beauty. That way, the world could begin to experience peace on war fronts, and peace on the diplomatic front. (110)

This statement by Kendem is a call for world peace which can begin with recognizing the other as a brother at all levels of intercultural communication. By so doing, issues of prejudice, stereotyping, and culturalism would be solved. Nkemngong's *God was African* is a satire on racist undertones experienced by Kendem when he visits America as a way of advocating intercultural harmony. This is because he comes from a Lewoh society where people believe in cultural harmony regardless of their different ways of worship. The American experience is a dilemma that affects intercultural communication as Fons Trompenaars and Peter Woolliams argue in "A New Framework for Managing Change Across Cultures" that:

Countries and organizations face dilemmas in dealing with the tension between the existing set of values and the desired ones. While cultures differ markedly in how they approach these dilemmas, they do not differ in needing to make some kind of response. They share the destiny to face up to different challenges of existence. Once the changed leaders have become aware of the problem-solving process, they will reconcile dilemmas more effectively and therefore will be more successful. (363)

It is therefore incumbent on leaders to create the necessary environment where home cultures can accommodate new ways of life and practices, especially with respect for the norms on the ground. Kendem admits that African cultures are more receptive when he looks at the way Lewoh's country

interacts with her neighbours. This experience is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of cultural identity that lives through the form of hybridity.

As a child born and raised in Lewoh, Kendem observes the way his mother blends both Christianity and tradition in the daily life of their family especially because their father accepts these two religions in their home. Kendem describes his mother thus:

My mother was a devoted convert to the Roman Catholic Church. She had introduced me to the Catholic faith from birth. But it seemed that she never really lost grip of the spiritual essence of her ancestors. The two faiths resided in her soul and each had occasion for expression, either during her normal Sunday morning worship and events organized by the church or during a village activity that required the performance of rites and rituals. (19)

Though illiterate, Kendem's mother is a hybrid which is surprising because, despite Kendem's level of education and his sojourns in America, he realizes that few whites manifest such an understanding of socio-cultural and religious harmony. This is the case with Bill Host who receives them during their visit to Harlem. Host believes that the success of intercultural communication is based on acceptance of differences, being truthful, loving, and caring for one another rather than scorn. Such perspective in intercultural discourse is described as the "cultural supermarket" by Gordon Mathews in *Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket*. To Mathews, the information within the cultural supermarket may be categorized by its users in different ways, but the two most readily available are the region of origin and the realm of use. To him:

We fashion ourselves from the cultural supermarket in several areas, among them our choices in home decor, food, and clothing, in what we read, watch, and listen to in music, art, and popular culture, in our religious belief, and in ethnic and national identity itself:

whether, in the United States, to identify oneself as Hispanic-American or as American; whether, in Hong Kong, to be Chinese or Hongkongese. These different shapes bear differing degrees of personal significance: one's choice of home décor. (20)

To Mathews, the information in the cultural supermarket usually corresponds to culture as "the way of life of a people," as embodied in national culture. He continues that we refer to Indian music, Brazilian samba, French cuisine, and so on, to have a shorthand way with which to refer to these entities. Mathews concludes that these entities become a vast array of materials in the cultural supermarket for consumers' ease. Kendem realizes that the choices people make in expressing religious beliefs and identities are what essentially define their lives. Consequently, Kendem and Tugu feel more comfortable staying by Bill Host than the other pilgrims since he advocates intercultural harmony.

Kendem's actions in *God was African* is a call for intercultural unity because although many of the pilgrims on the Fulbright program segregate him, he uses his computer knowledge to build social harmony between them. When Tunis-Aziz invites him to connect her computer, he sees this as an opportunity as he says:

I had acquired the experience when I bought my laptop and the university technician had installed it for me. When I succeeded in setting up Tunis-Aziz's laptop, many of the pilgrims invited me to their apartments to install theirs and other accessories. I had an interesting way of doing it. As soon as I installed the internet on the laptop, I quickly searched the internet and played the national anthem of the country. There was usually a lot of excitement at the surprise of having one's national anthem played in new media equipment in his or her apartment in a faraway land. And we spent the evening singing various anthems. (111)

Anthems carry cultures, values, and heroes which reveal patriotism and nostalgia because after singing these anthems, they tell stories about their different countries and cultures and these exchanges are edifying in intercultural communication. This harmony is further manifested when the pilgrims visit Don Tomson's farm in Deering Town for dinner. The fact that Tomson's wife prepares a variety of foreign dishes and takes time to explain the importance of these dishes in their cultures gives the pilgrims the desire to discover foreign cuisine as Kendem confesses that "I ate anything that could be eaten depending on how pleasant it was to the eyes" (91). The richness of cultural diversity is the gold behind the American Fulbright program which the seventeen pilgrims selected from across the world enjoy as highlighted to them upon their arrival by Bill Host, the director of the programme:

The US is an example of a fairly successful attempt at reconciling diversity with national unity, stressing social equality, cultural diversity, a fluid superstructure, social mobility, and religious toleration as the fundamental pillars of American civilization. (63)

Kendem understands that America is a conglomeration of heterogeneous people because many slaves were uprooted from their original lands and brought to work there. But he believes that for America to make herself credible to Africa, the slave masters owe apologies to all the other parts of the world where slaves were from. Though the Fulbright program is the beginning of this apology, Kendem believes more still needs to be done in these countries because only the very educated benefit from this program. However, he notes that the goal of this program is for the pilgrims to get a huge repertoire of knowledge that they can use to develop their home countries. Rogers M. Everett, William B. Hart, and Yoshitaka Miike discuss the origin of such exchange programs in "Edward T. Hall and the History of Intercultural Communication: The United States and Japan" highlighting that:

In 1946, the U.S. Congress passed the Foreign Service Act, which established the Foreign Service Institute in

the U.S. Department of State to provide training throughout the careers of Foreign Service officers and other State Department personnel like American development workers. One function of the FSI was to teach language skills, a type of training that was carried out quite successfully. The FSI hired several of the key linguists who had been involved in the Army Language Programme during World War II, which was designed with the help of the Modern Language Association. With the Army Language instructors came the strategy of using native speakers, and thus the importance of cultural understanding in the process of language instruction. (8)

Eventually, these language instructors were brought in from countries around the world through the Fulbright program and they learned American culture and exported them to their home countries. Therefore, Kendem and the other sixteen pilgrims are beneficiaries of this exchange program who spend months in America during which they learn the advantages of intercultural communication as well as how to prevent culture shocks of Otherisation. He thinks that Africans on their part should forgive these slave masters because that is the first step to accepting peaceful coexistence.

From another perspective, intercultural communication can be negotiated through songs and dance. When the pilgrims go to Deering Town, they visit the local pops in the evening to drink with the natives. Kendem finds this experience enriching because the traditional dancing style of these natives is similar to that of Lewoh. He posits that:

I didn't find the square dance as complicated as I had thought. If one were used to other rhythms and could dance with liveliness, with pride and vivacity [...]. Although the dance styles were different, one needed to watch the villagers dance and follow the instructions of the caller [...]. We danced the circles, the most popular of the dances, till I found myself sweating profusely. (85)

By dancing, the pilgrims forget their racial differences and Kendem notices that singing different songs in the form of karaoke makes everyone happy. Kendem sings Western songs he learned as a child through karaoke and the other pilgrims admire his talent and come up stage to dance with him, thus overcoming previous racial prejudices they had at the beginning of the pilgrimage. Assessing the importance of music in intercultural communication, John Storey in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* points out that:

Pop music exhibits 'emotional realism'; young men and women 'identify with these collective representations and... use them as guiding fictions. Such symbolic fiction is the folklore using which the teenager, in part, shapes and composes his mental picture of the world (55)

Music becomes a cultural text and practice that reconstructs people's experiences, values, and the "structure of feeling" of particular groups or classes or whole societies to understand the lives of those who live in Deering Town. Kendem's experiences that translate culture through music are further justified when the pilgrims visit Santa Fe, Los Alamos, and Chimayo where they commune with Native Americans and he admires the cowboy cultural life and their hospitality when he affirms that:

We drank wine and beer and watched the townsfolk with admiration. They wore their cowboy outfit of large bowler hats, white long-sleeved shirts, and close-fitting pantaloons tugged in long leather boots. They danced to the rhythm of country music issuing from a live band on a little platform at the north end of the bar. (165)

Despite the rapid modernization of the country, many Native American towns still preserve their cultural heritage. Kendem is surprised at the warm reception they get from these cowboy natives who do not care about colour or class differences. He further admires their dressing codes because he saw these in

cowboy and Western films back home as a boy and he remembers the cowboy shooting games they used to play. All these experiences are enriching thanks to intercultural communication because according to Adrian Holliday, Martin Hyde, and John Kullman:

Being sensitive to and understanding others' cultural productions and how they play with the various identities available to them [...] is a crucial part of good intercultural communication. A good interpersonal communicator, therefore, needs to be aware of issues surrounding the concept of identity. Before we can communicate with people who are different from ourselves, we need to understand something about how they present themselves as being or belonging to certain groups. (19)

To these authors, belongingness among the members of any group partly involves the learning and use of particular discourses. It is therefore Kendem's familiarity and ease of use of these discourses that demonstrate his membership of a particular group – that is, the cultural territory of Santa Fe. This territory is defined by its past which is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth which are important values in interpersonal communication.

Kendem's flashback to these Western songs they sang in their youth reveals their unconscious dream of one day going to Europe or America. This is because experiencing the American dream is important to many African families who see the investments in houses or luxury cars that come with migration. The pride in some African families is to have successful children overseas as Kendem describes their sacrifices "it had become a routine for parents to mortgage farms and houses to raise money to buy flight tickets. It had become prestigious for families to hire buses to accompany heroes and heroines to the airports" (49). These families celebrate the numerous material as well as psychological advantages that come with successful migrants. Through them, some African parents have had the opportunity to visit the West to spend time with their children and grandchildren and this has improved intercultural communication as many

come back with very rich experiences. This is the case of Kendem whose hybrid nature after he returns from America is celebrated by the chief of Lewoh when he says:

The red man came with his church and he was welcomed. He opened schools and our children went there to learn books and learn about their culture. Some of them are big people today, like my child sitting here who has climbed the sky in an airplane and landed in a foreign country. Today he is back home sitting with us here. We are grateful to the Red Man for making us know their own culture. (146)

By accepting to cohabit with Christianity, the Lewoh people considered the white man's God not different from their gods and thought of a society where there would be religious harmony. Ironically, Christianity came with the colonizing agenda seen through the dispute over the burial of Chief Beyano and the triumph of tradition. This reveals that to ensure intercultural harmony, Christianity needs to accommodate certain Lewoh traditional practices. Understanding that the issue of polygamy is paramount to the people of Lewoh, during the requiem mass of the late chief, the parish priest acknowledges that "individuals were now free to go to church and receive the sacrament of God without bias for certain cultural constraints like polygamy" (272). Thus, by coming back to the practices of the Lewoh people after centuries of refusal, it can be concluded that God is African seen when the narrator says "God exists through the inexplicable paradoxes of creation and the individual perceives these through his or her consciousness" (273). It is this consciousness that Kendem gains after his sojourns in America that he attends the different deliberations of the council of chiefs and notables in the palace and his initiation into the ruling council of Lewoh country. These village encounters give rise so to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to his lost origins, to be one again with his mother, to go back to the beginning and start performing the traditional rituals in the ancestral shrine of the family.

Conclusion

The need by human society to solve the problem of authorization and prejudice in intercultural communication is urgent today more than before. The starting point is to encourage religious tolerance in different societies because every culture carries its religious and ancestral paradigms. It should also be noted that the African continent and other Third World regions are the most affected because religious imperialism otherised traditional gods and cultural practices. Ironically, Nkemngong Nkengasong's protagonist in *God is an African* who grows up in this imperialistic ideology and only realizes after he visits America that God is worshipped more in Africa than in the West. For intercultural communication to be effective, Kendem proposes that every society becomes a junction point where cultural tributaries meet, where strangers from every other part of the globe collide. This new junction point where black, brown, white, African, European, American, Spanish, French, East Indian, Chinese, Portuguese, Jew, Dutch, etc. will meet will facilitate the negotiation of creolisations and assimilations. The cultural identity and harmony between Lewoh country and her neighbours become Nkemngong's microcosm that needs to be globalized to constantly negotiate with foreign others against the prejudices of stereotyping, ethnic reductionism, and culturalism. Through Kendem therefore, the crusade for intercultural communication has just begun, more is expected from present-day intellectuals.

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