

UPGRADING AFRICAN INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE IN AMERICAN FICTION: A READING OF KATHLEEN GRISSOM'S *THE KITCHEN HOUSE*

Kpalambo Ebony AGBOH

Université de Lomé, Togo

ebonag3@gmail.com

Abstract : African indigenous knowledge has often encountered many instinctual criticisms about its importance in the development of the world. Hopefully, many other voices today echo the fact that Africa, cradle of mankind, has highly contributed to the advancement of the world education standing as the bedrock of peace and development. It is now one big challenge for African scholars, writers, etc. to readjust Africa's image. In such a biased understanding, Kathleen Grissom's *The Kitchen House* trying to restore the view, offers the critic a narration of choice for analysis. This study aims to analyze the importance of African indigenous knowledge and the teaching capacities Africans hold to change the world where Western holistic education has failed. Culturalism and chaos theory deployed in this paper show how Grissom extolls Lavinia's education achieved under African traditional knowledge.

Key words: education, indigenous, knowledge, peace, society.

Résumé : Le savoir autochtone africain a souvent fait l'objet de nombreuses critiques instinctives quant à son importance dans le développement du monde. Heureusement, de nombreuses voix aujourd'hui se font l'écho de la contribution de l'Afrique, berceau de l'humanité, à l'avancement de l'éducation dans le monde et en tant que tel au fondement de la paix et de tout développement. C'est maintenant un grand défi pour les universitaires africains, les écrivains, etc. de réajuster l'image de l'Afrique. Face à ces idées légères, l'écrivaine Américaine Kathleen Grissom tout en essayant de restaurer l'image de l'Afrique offre au critique de son récit *The Kitchen House* la possibilité d'une analyse intéressante. Cette étude vise à analyser l'importance du savoir autochtone africain et la capacité des noirs à éduquer l'humanité pour changer le monde là où l'éducation holistique occidentale a échoué. Le culturalisme et la théorie du chaos déployés dans cet article montrent comment Grissom célèbre l'éducation de Lavinia réalisée dans le cadre du savoir autochtone africain.

Mots clés : autochtone, connaissance, éducation, paix, société.

Introduction

Many voices and opinions tend to despise and curtail the contribution of Africans in the development of the world. They are often absent from international decision-making conferences meant to promote the well-being of the society. Yet, their knowledge seems to include the category of human type of knowledge grounded on secular human values and customs respectful of nature.

In fact, African knowledge concept raises the issue of its value yielded for the world. To confront the challenges that the future holds in store regarding the promotion of the world, Delors (1996, p. 13) believes that people must see in education "an indispensable asset in its attempt to attain the ideals of peace, freedom and social justice." But the consequences of colonization on Africa only disrobed traditional African education of its core values and brought in new modes of holistic education invented to dominate mankind. Believing that African "indigenous knowledge" refers to pre-colonial African knowledge in Africa (Adebisi, 2016, p. 434) is to understand the truly established intention of colonizers to impose their rule on Africa.

However, the removal of oppressive chains from the indigenous African education underpins Tedla Elleni's (1992, p. 7) holding that indigenous African learning plays a vital role in the transmission of values that Africans consider to be essential in understanding and experiencing the fullness of life. Against the intangibility of indigenous knowledge denounced by Westerners, Ladislaus Semali (1999, p.307) to paraphrase Warren and his associates poses that "indigenous knowledge is not elusive, as many modernists would argue; rather it is about what local people know and do, and what local communities have known and done for generations - practices that developed through trial and error and proved flexible enough to cope with change."

The capacity of Africans to bring up any child following their principles and ways of knowledge transmission meets Kathleen Grissom's narration on the slaves' practices in *The Kitchen House*, the focus of this article. The novelist's invitation of Lavinia, a white protagonist, in an African American slave house is purposefully designed to immerse the latter in African indigenous knowledge. Grissom's novel

portrays [Africa'(s)] or, African slaves' capacity to bring up the world. By driving African indigenous knowledge back to African slaves' cultural living context in *The Kitchen House*, this study aims to analyze the importance the indigenous knowledge of Africans and the teaching capacities they hold to change the world where Western holistic education has failed.

In the present study, Africa refers to the geographical continent where Blacks lived before their forced removal to the New Continent. Indigenous and traditional, used interchangeably, characterize the original knowledge Africans brought from Africa to the America. The impact this knowledge could have in the society is the driving force behind the analysis in this essay which deploys both Edward B. Taylor's cultural perspective as is adapted by Gabriel E. Idang (2015, p. 98) who holds "culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs or any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" and Gordon E. Slethaug's (2000, P. xii) perspective of chaos theory which overturns established views of science and systems chimes. Aiming to show how African mis-judged knowledge needs reconsideration for its input in rearing the humanity, the current study purports that Grissom's *The Kitchen House* debunks Western knowledge which does not necessarily entail harmony, peace, love, and happiness for the humankind.

1. The Paradox between the Holistic Education and Chaos in the World

Before their forced drift to America as slaves in the 16th century, Africans led a natural harmonious and peaceful life on the African continent. In spite of their long stay in America, Africans did not yield to the cultural resources of the host society. They remained true to their indigenous cultural codes.

Nowadays, the world is being socially run-down as a result of the inability of Western holistic education to stabilize social relations among peoples. The type of education Western countries have introduced to offer education does not ensure a total blossom of the people. By convoking both P. Ochieng (2012) who believes that "[people] are highly educated yet our education is academic only given that socially,

morally, and spiritually we are probably the world's most ignorant group" and R. Mosha (2000) who expounds the same view, holding that "most world leaders are well educated but justice and peace continue to escape us and billions of people are not anywhere close to a life fully alive, fully human", Wyclife Ong'eta (2018, p.150) contrasts holistic education with its negative impact on the society. In fact, many people who leave their home traditions and customs have also lost the values they cherished before their fusion with the holistic Western education. It is therefore averred that Western education brought a kind of mess shared and expanded everywhere in the world.

Grissom's *The Kitchen House* projects a chaotic environment where life has become a mere thing jeopardized by herb sneaking and dangerous actions:

There was a strong smell of smoke, and new fear fueled me. [...] I forbade myself to think I was too late and focused all my strength on moving toward home. Foolishly, I misjudged, and meaning to take a shortcut to the stream, I swerved from the path to dash through the trees. To my horror, I found myself trapped. (Grissom, 2010, p. 1)

The above quotation clearly shows how trapped the narrator is in a situation where everything is upside down. The "smoke", and the "strong smell" infer the presence of drug smokers who are consumed and destroyed by their addiction to herbs. Clearly, the atmosphere has become horrendous and as a matter of fact, wellbeing and peace are lost.

Besides, Slethaug (2000, p. xxiii) has come to believe that chaos denotes confusion and disorder. However, the point raised is to depict chaos as the dis-organization of a naturally well-organized system. The setting is purposely chaotic and is created by the writer to arouse the search for order. The image of a hanging body on a "massive oak tree with lush green leaves shading the thick branch that bore the weight of the hanging body" wearing a "green headscarf and the handmade shoes that pointed down" (Grissom, 2010, p. 2) invokes the gruesome presence of a dis-organized society. It is my contention that most of these people involved in the killing and actions of destruction - which create disharmony - have been well educated and vowed to defend the noble cause of peace that obviously escape their control.

Chaos in the novel is also represented by many issues that surround the institution of slavery including mistreatment, rape, separation of families, and death, mental illness, and its treatment as well as the effects of opium addiction are signs of sadness and tears of an unhappy life brought by the holistic education holders namely the captain's family.

Let me fix your hair. Belle removed Dory's head rag and wove a blue ribbon through Dory's braided hair. When she'd finished, she held up the mirror. Dory glanced at her reflection, then her face crumpled and she began to cry. Belle leaned down to hug her. "Baby Henry is happy where he is, and I know he'd want you be happy." [...] Mama was watching, and when we saw her use her apron to wipe tears from her own eyes, we three girls also began to sob. (Grissom 2010, p. 40)

The slaves' situation, including the wearing of rags by Dory, the death of her child Henry, the tears, etc. remove all sources of happiness from the kitchen house. It is arguable that the present conditions are created by the white people who are thought to be well educated but cannot create peace and happiness in their surroundings.

In such difficult context, the slaves managed to create their own happy conditions where they could forget about their daily problems. Simply after crying in the precedent event mentioned in the forgoing, Mae invited them all to get prepared for the party which they effectively attended. (Grissom 2010, p. 40-41) As a result of their decision to escape their daily miseries, all the African characters became ready to play the role then can play in terms of the advancement of the world.

2. Characters' Cultural and Psychological Attitudes in Teachings the World

Some indigenous knowledge are thought to be at the beginning of worthy human behavior. Indeed, scholars have classified scientific subjects into different categories including philosophy, physics, mathematics, psychology, etc.

In fact, indigenous education has not left any formal classified contents for generational transmission. Nevertheless, the concept of traditional 'scholar' would suggest the idea of an African fully empowered to learn through observation and practice and be able to transmit to forthcoming generations the knowledge acquired. "Traditional" means indigenous, that which is aboriginally or foundationally handed

onto other generations to be upheld and practiced forever. Many debates on indigenous knowledge have fallen in the shadows of Western ideas of globalization, as this type of knowledge is inconsistently projected "as a stagnant, limited, and inoperative paradigm which pushes some to conclude that any serious discussion about the indigenous transmission of values and its accumulated knowledge in Africa is a waste of time" (Ong'eta, 2018, p. 152). In fact, an African-based cultural analysis would question these Western globalist ideas and reveal the "particulars of indigenous ways of knowing and their epistemologies."

Mama Mae's attitudes through the novel brand her as a psychologist, a concept aligned after the perspective of Botterill, Carruthers, and Peter (1999, p. 2), whereby "in general, there is no serious doubt that other people do have thoughts and feelings just as we ourselves do." As a matter of fact, Mae can detect and understand the motives and mobiles of other human behavior as her own. In other words, she puts herself in other people's shoes.

The psychological capacity of Mae to analyze lethally immersed Lavinia memories of the loss of her mother before she reaches the kitchen house reflects the necessity of the world to digest the potentialities of Africans to actively participate in the construction of the modern world.

I rocked wildly as I clung to the memory of pain, to the memory of my mother. I couldn't release it; [...] "Abinia," she said, trying to hold me still, "you tell Mama Mae why you rockin' like this." She held my face and forced my eyes to meet hers. "You talk to Mama. Abinia, you got to talk. Don't you go away like this. You talk to Mama. You tell her what the trouble is. (Grissom, 2010, p. 29)

Mama's effort to bring Lavinia to speak is a cogent image of Africans practice of psychology with positive results, to trust Lavinia's own confession: "Somehow, I heard Mama Mae's truth, and my heart believed her. Having found my past, I clung to this mother who now gave me my future" (Grissom, 2010, p. 30).

Undeniably, Mae did not attend conventional school, but she was able to practice efficiently as a trained psychologist would have done. The result of Mae's practice is the total satisfaction of Lavinia. Also, by diffusing traditional knowledge potentialities in other scientific domains like obstetrics, "Mama had [Lavinia] cut the purple cord,

and after she cleaned and wrapped the child, handed the baby to [her]" (Grissom, 2010, p. 161). These prevailing evidences weaken the absence of African traditional knowledge from the canon of education and center-stage it as a companion to Western style of education. The postmodern world must understand that one-sized education does not fit all. In fact, the type of education that would fit all in Mara Loren Baum's advocacy is the one that is biophilic¹, i.e., an education whose results satisfy every human being without provoking destruction, death, and chaos.

For centuries, African ancestors have been producing knowledge about the world and nature. Knowledge forms the basis of the economic and household culture of African people, which includes a whole range of traditions, customs, rites and practices that ensure the continuity of community life and reproducibility of the population in certain climatic conditions.

The traditional social organization classified bodies in the house and in the community. Knowledge, skills, ideas, attitudes, and patterns of behavior were to be transmitted through riddles to explain the origin of the tribe and the genesis of man. But the names of trees, plants, animals and insects were imparted with their dangers and uses, among others. Besides, boys herded cattle or farmed land with their fathers, while girls helped their mothers in household chores. Moses Wandera observes in this connection that:

For socialisation, instructions were given in the camp on tribal laws and customs especially on dos and don'ts of various behavior as well as on occupational training for instance transmission of skills in handicrafts and the impartation of social skills. Parents, institutions and the age groups participated in the education process. (Wandera, 2018, p. 270)

Undoubtedly, Africa is a well-structured and community-centered society. Knowledge and the choice of words to transmit it had to be considered an art in themselves. And Mae is an artist.

¹ "Innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms"

As a matter of fact, in addition to transmitting African knowledge to her people, Mae equally grabs every opportunity to teach Lavinia African ancestral education. Lavinia, as a young white lady in the bosom of Mae, has been disposed to receive knowledge from the old lady. It is obviously the author's strategy to bring Africans at the teacher position. Lavinia is essentially taught the vital knowledge people supposedly consider inferior to the framed Western holistic education system.

The incarnation of love and peace is revealed through Mae and most of the family members.

In general, an attitude usually understood as a pro-attitude of a person consists in caring about another person (Helm, 2017, p. 4). Mae's love for her children Dory, Bettie and Fanny is unmeasurable because she extended it to other characters that are not her natural children. In fact, Bell, the mulatta and Lavinia the white newly arrived girl both acknowledge Mae's strong caring attitude to Lavinia who is considered a baby when Mae hoisted me onto her lap (Grissom, 2010, p. 13). This is a real testimony of Mae's deep love for Lavinia.

If education in the world is only to teach a child how to read and write as is done to Bell, the mulatta daughter of Mr. Pyke who grew in the big house and was solely taught to do so, then motherly and humanly love as is proven by Mae needs to complete the first one in the biblical perspective (John XV: xii). Arguably, it is wrongly expected that the world's chaos be settled by the knowing how to read and write. Life with wars and absence of peace needs to be worked out in the line of Donald DeMarco's perspective of love (2013, p. 44) as "a radical affinity that makes possible the blending and mending of human souls. In this sense, love is the great equalizer, having the inherent potential for being expressed between any one human being and any other. Love, therefore, is an affirmation of the other, regarding the other in his wholeness". Thus, the need of every human being to harmoniously connect to nature by ways and practices that secure the promotion of the world.

3. African Traditional Beliefs as Ways to Harmony

Generally, disagreements and tensions arouse when different opinions cannot get a point of understanding. Many conflict-like contexts would mention religion as one of the most discordant things that often bears the seeds of disharmony, war, etc. But it can be argued that indigenous African religion which is characterized by traditional beliefs and practices of spirituality, despite its polytheistic, varied, and usually informed characteristic, seem to make the difference. It is the religion which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africans, and which is being practiced today in various forms and various shades and intensities by many Africans, including individuals who claim to be Muslims or Christians. Jacob Olupona by quoting Awolalu (1976, p. 1) in a-2015 interview affirms that “African spirituality simply acknowledges that beliefs and practices touch on and inform every facet of human life, and therefore African religion cannot be separated from the everyday or mundane.”

The dimensional spirituality that this essay proposes to analyze opposes the beliefs in one God governing peoples’ lives. In fact, Africans’ connection to the Almighty Creator is naturally oriented. Connection with the Devine goes by their attitude to inspire them and see the presence of godly power in everything. Hence, the practice of rituals by Mae translates the necessity to keep a good relationship with those forces which predisposes Africans to sharing their spiritual heritage with the rest of the world.

Traditional religion holds a clear and sustainable understanding of the connection of a man to his Creator. While the tridimensional relation between man, fellow human, and God is threatened in the context of conventional religions, African traditional religion takes chances to show its capacity to bring unity and peace.

Conventional religion breeds division among people, as is done by some of the white people against Blacks. The matter is that Western education system has sown many bogus ideas in the white population to the extent that even in Church, they claim

to be the only people deserving to meet God. African traditional religion connects nature and humans and provides the central understanding of spirituality.

When thoughts are harmoniously oriented, the best thing to happen is the love among people. It is, therefore, objectionable that the white people, based on the color of the skin of other peoples to believe they do not equal them to seat together during Sunday service. Lovely mother Mae who has held the responsibility to teach Lavinia, Bell, and other children about love, caring for others and caring for the universe has succeeded in her job. Openly confessing her deep frustrations about the behavior of many white people during Sunday service, Lavinia responds to Mama in the following words to show she has well learnt the lesson about loving one another: "Mostly it seems like I' part of the family, but in church I have to go up front and sit with the white people, I want to sit with the twins, and they can't come up with me, and I can't go back by them. You aren't my real mama, and Bell isn't, either. Where will I go when I grow up? And I don't want to live in a big house, either!" (Grissom, 2010, p. 160) Mae's lesson of the family to Lavinia is yet to terminate. She ultimately advises "when you grow up, you take that family feeling with you" to knock over her brain again that family does not only represent the people you cherish around but family is everybody 'far' around.

Additionally, the principle of respecting the passed away in African traditional spirituality has been explored and evoked in the narrative to impart understanding that it highly contributes to creating harmony between the living and dead. Indeed, the connection between them seems often menaced by the newly conventional religious principles who reject Africans' invocation of their bereaved but accept the idea of invoking Saints. By accepting the connection with trespassed parents or relatives, Africans also stand in their right to connect with their ancestors and expect their blessings, advice, and protection.

Africans lived in close relationship with nature, that is, land, vegetation, and animals and because of limited technological development, they were related to one another by extended ties of kinship which bound them to such unlined kinship groups as the lineage and the clan. Such a connection with the wilderness safeguarded their

peace and harmony. The preservation of harmony in Africa rested on the transcending aspect of people's life to cope with their immediate environment. J. O. Awolalu (1976, p. 8) sustains that "African Traditional Religion is not essentially idolatrous, but it has a tendency to become so if the cult and the symbols of the divinities are so emphasized as to exclude the Supreme Being". Clearly, to the mind that there is a Supreme Being Africans rely on and trust. And generally, death remains the decisive element that reminds Africans' connection with their divinities.

Death, although a dreaded event, is perceived as the beginning of a person's deeper relationship with all the creation, the complementing of life and the beginning of the communication between the visible and the invisible worlds. The goal of life is to become an ancestor after death. Every dead person deserves appropriate funerals, supported by several religious ceremonies. Failing to do so, the dead may become a wandering ghost, unable to "live" properly after death and therefore a danger to those who remain alive.

In the narrative, Mae's grandchild baby Henry's death is an occasion for Mae to reaffirm her faith in the existence of a Supreme Being who watches over them. In the unfolding context, Mae took the opportunity to teach young Lavinia what Africans think about death: "Baby Henry is not in the water, that baby is with the Lawd. He in a good place. He laughin' and playin' with other children of the Lawd. He not hurtin' no more!". As a matter of the fact, Mae resorted to African ceremony in her burial of little baby Henry when the latter passed away. She prepared him by wrapping the body in a traditional way before putting it in the woody coffin that would flow over the river and disappear (Grissom, 2010, p. 67).

Once again, Mae's actions and attitude before death reminds Lavinia, the protagonist, of her mother's passing away and reasoned "My ma is in the water" as if she wanted to accept and hold the faithful statement of Mae who believed that neither her grandchild Henry nor Lavinia's mother, died in the water before her arrival in the kitchen house as the truth to cling to. The confirmation of Lavinia's belief and conviction in the presence of her bereaved mother around her is expressed through

her own confession that “somehow, I heard Mama Mae’s *truth*² and my heart believed her” (Grissom, 2010, p. 30). Knowledge must not conveniently dwell only on Western holistic and rational knowledge. A large portion of it also stems from traditions and beliefs from Africa.

Conclusion

This study extolled indigenous knowledge as complementary to the conventional world system of knowledge and education regarding its importance as an alternative knowledge.

African traditional knowledge and education are rejected by Western education systems on the ground that they are not scientific and rational, Grissom’s *The Kitchen House* demonstrates otherwise. Armed with their traditional knowledge, African slaves were able to survive slave trade as the background education and knowledge they brought to the New World served to demystify this outlandish understanding. Despite their confrontation with many hardships, African slave kept this knowledge safely and made it the cornerstone of their participation in the development of the world.

Western education teaches how to read and write. Yet, the results yielded by their system crates destruction and chaos. But Mae’s religious beliefs, psychological and obstetrical competences portrayed in the novel, coupled with her conditioning to teach Lavinia is a sign of Africa’s grandeur to add more to the world’s development which has failed to acknowledge the importance of African traditional knowledge. Unchallengingly, by offering the opportunity to the African slave characters to prove the instrumentality of African knowledge in *The Kitchen House*, Grissom has allowed them to reveal themselves as potentially gifted by nature to positively accompany the world in the process of creating peace and harmony.

² My italics to emphasize Mae’s knowledge is worth teaching

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