

*The Narrative Techniques and
the Oral Tradition in Ayi Kwei
Armah's¹ **The Healers***

Ahmad Saber[★]

★ Ph.D. African and Comparative Literature, University of Georgia, U.S.A. 1985.
Associate Professor, College of Arts, University of Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah.

Abstract

Indeed **The Healers** is a well-constructed novel, woven effectively around its central situation, the historical situation and the myth-making process. Furthermore, the novel's form and structure are marked by a dramatic narrative shift strikingly different from that of Armah's earlier novels. **The Healers'** narrative design is more accurate and more precise. Looking at its formal division into seven parts with six sub-divisions each, one may quickly get the impression that the novel has an episodic plot. Far from this, **The Healers'** narrative structure is quite complex. Its complexity derives mainly from the rich variety of narrative techniques through which the novel addresses itself to the reader. These include oral narration, epic proportion, the narrator's use of the plural voice, the techniques of time-pattern. All these narrative methods are used accordingly with the novel's communal sense, historical and myth-making guidelines, didactic intent, and socio-political thought.

The Healers's relationship with oral literature is embedded as much in its form and narrative techniques as in its content. Thus, Armah perfectly adopts the African oral tradition of narration and storytelling based on those of the West African "griot" whose "art linked indissolubly the functions of entertainment and education."

Indeed Ayi Kwei Armah's **The Healers** is a well-constructed novel, woven effectively around its central plot, the historical situation and the myth-making process. Furthermore, the novel's structure is marked by a dramatic narrative shift strikingly different from that of Armah's earlier novels. **The Healers'** narrative design is more pointed and more precise. Looking at its formal division into seven parts of six sub-divisions each, one may quickly get the impression that the novel has an episodic plot. Far from it: **The Healer's** narrative structure is quite complex. Its complexity derives mainly from the rich variety of narrative levels and techniques through which the novel addresses itself to the reader. These include oral narration, epic proportion, the narrator's use of the plural "we," and the techniques of time-patterns and repetition. All these narrative methods are used to enhance the communal theme of the novel.

It is worth noting that just before the composition of **Two Thousand Seasons** and **The Healers** Armah had become very steeped in African oral literature. Particularly Mofolo's **Chaka** (Armah, 1975: 51-52, 84-90) and Niane's **Sundiata** (Armah, 1974: 51-52, 93-96) seem to have fascinated the Ghanaian novelist, to the extent that he himself decided to write narrative fiction under the influence of African oral tradition. The griot's telling of history has interested him most. For instance, in a book review of **Sundiata**, which clearly reveals such special interest, he carefully outlines what he sees as the importance of the griot's narrative art. He describes his social, political, cultural, and educational importance in ancient West African societies where the telling of history by the griot was the most serious lyrical art and the most popular narrative. In this context, Armah asserts that "the griot was a thoroughly professional artist trained to use the subject matter of his people's history as the raw materials of his art. The artist, the griot was therefore the historian and story teller, both" (Armah, 1974:51).

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In essence, the griot's oral tradition is basically epic, historical and political. His songs and stories are very much like epic, but generally in Western culture, the epic is confined to legendary and mythological periods whereas in Africa the epic is perceived as exclusively historical, including the present. In narrating stories of a hero's exploits the griot usually employs grandiose language, epithets, authorial interventions and direct statements of morals. He also evokes other griots and masters of the oral tradition and frequently uses repetition to animate and to give rhythm to his story. In addition, the griot, this "maitre de la parole," incorporates proverbs and popular sentences to recapitulate some tenet of conventional wisdom or to create humor. In short, the griot is an authoritative arbiter of truth and morality. Before a live audience his oral tradition is dramatically supported by musical instruments (**nkoni, kora** or **balafon**), by songs and by certain forms of dance which are a prerogative of the griot only (Camara, 1976:108).

By telling his story from the point of view of the griot, Armah wants to revive an im-

portant ancient African oral tradition. Also, he uses this narrative technique as a means of rendering as exactly as possible the novel's historical dimension and socio-political thought, which themselves are reinforced by the griot's telling of history. Formerly, the griots, for want of archives and other material means of storing information, were the only professionally trained recorders, repositories, and transmitters of customs, traditions, governmental principles, and deeds of kings. In addition, Armah's skillful manipulation of the West African oral art of the griot must be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to Africanize the formal structure of Eurocentric literary tradition. In essence, Armah's narrative experimentation is very much in line with the ever growing awareness of the social and political context within which the professional artist in Africa operates (Fraser, 1980:X). It is another manifestation of the Ghanaian novelist's commitment to his art.

Anona, the supposed griot in **The Healers**, does not pretend to be inventing his material and thereby limiting himself to his own authority only. Instead he makes positive claims for the truth of his narrative by evoking the authority of past practitioners and "masters in the art of eloquence" in order to give more legitimacy and force to what he narrates. Furthermore, by invoking the Sotho author Thomas Mopoku Mofolo (1876-1948, p. 52) and other African griots and masters of the verbal art (pp. 2-3, 51), Armah not only demonstrates his own Pan-African vision but also strengthens Anona's position as an authoritative storyteller and 'historian.' Anona is quite knowledgeable about oral traditions in Africa, and it is this knowledge which entitles him to the use of the plural number, meaning "we griots" and we Africans."

Anona is not, however, an all-seeing narrator. In many instances he allows other characters, who are themselves involved in the historical movement, to establish the narrative, to act and report the actuality of the novel (pp. 110-115, 181-183). Consequently Armah does not simply give us the bare facts about the Asante Empire but describes their causation as well (pp. 209-218). Thereby the novelist presents his characters not only as makers of history but also as constructors of scenes and actions, evoking historical events and relating them as well as linking causes and effects. To add more significance to his narrative, Anona uses the first person plural pronoun to consolidate the novel's communal theme and to create and atmospheres which will provide the reader with a sense of history unfolding. Thus the narrator does not remain anonymous or unfamiliar. Nor does he place himself outside the historical account. By abruptly becoming 'we,' 'our,' or 'us' (pp. 4-5, 83, 175-176, 169-170, 278-279, 309), the narrator asserts his position and affirms his and the readers' involvement in the events. In addition, the technique of the collective voice enhances Armah's ideology of communal heroism. Just as the narrator is, to use Wayne Booth's phrase, the author's "implied version of 'himself'," (Booth, 1961:70) the plural voice is an indication of the novelist's own involvement in his subject matter. Besides, the collective voice is meant to catapult the African audience into a new state of consciousness, and not only to instill in listeners beliefs but also to bring about imaginative and reflective involvement and a moral stance toward the state of affairs he is presenting. It must be added that the plural voice is consistent with the oral-rhetorical prescription derived from the griot's way of telling history as both entertainment and persuasion.

The Healers has a narrative structure which is characterized by epic scope and proportions. As we have mentioned above, prior to the composition of **The Healers**, Armah's growing interest in the epic form is clear from his reviews of the two most well-known African historical epics **Chaka** and **Sundiata**. Thus in writing **The Healers**, which is subtitled 'an historical novel,' but which may be considered an epic of old Ghana, and by extension, a Pan-African epic, Armah has inevitably invested its narrative design with epic elements such as the opening of his narrative **in medias res**, the statement of themes, the use of figures of heroic proportion (Densu, Asamoah, Wolseley, Glover, the healers), setting in vast scope, the invocation to the Muse (Anona's invocation to Mofolo and other griots for inspiration), catalogs of kings, chiefs, tribes, and rivers (pp. 6, 84, 180, 204-210), the combination of animal and human traits in a single character (Buntu), conflicts among ethnic groups and nations (the Asante Kingdom and Britain), and the use of sustained elevation of style.

In addition to the above elements, **The Healers'** narrative design grows out of an historical past, which to a large extent influences its time-scheme. Armah is quite careful about fixing actions in both time and place (p. 2), in spite of the fact that he has eschewed a conventionally direct chronology of events. The avoidance of the limitations of a rigid chronology allows the novelist to range freely not only over the span of the Asante past but also over African history, while focusing on the close relationship between past and present, present and future. It also reinforces the cultural norms within the Asante society in which the flow of time is perceived through a collective consciousness and not through a mathematical chronology. In other words, actions or events are presented through time-cycles commensurate with the traditional notion of time held together by the Asante people.

As a whole the past is depicted through two different perspectives: the general or historical past, and the individual or personal past. The historical past is the main focus of the novel. Within the limits of such an historical canvas, we have a meticulous recollection of a personal past by characters themselves or by the narrator about them. In this regard, Araba Jesiwa tells Densu about her life and about how Damfo happens to prevent her from destroying herself (pp. 69-77). Sometimes historical and personal pasts are blended together. Thus the narrator makes Densu recall his experiences when he was just twelve years old, but at the same time he tells of the historical appearance of the first white man to arrive at Esuano (pp. 156-159). His remembrance of the "deadness of the past" is accompanied with hope that in future "if he worked well he would be part of the preparation for generations which would inherit the potency that should bring people back together" (p. 159). As the narrative advances, these flash-backs and flashes forward create juxtapositions which force the reader to compare, explain and evaluate the more salient characters and events of the history and the plot. These juxtapositions also serve to convey Armah's perception of history as a continuous flux of competing social forces. (This is sometimes expressed overtly, as on pp. 83-84 and 172). To enhance the time framework or "temporal documentation" of his narrative, Armah employs additional references to landmarks in the life of the community, such as the annual festivities of the games of initiation at Esuano. And to produce a convincing impression of historical veracity and circumstantial credibility, the narrator defines the proper setting of the novel, gives names of historical figures, and places

such as Esuano, Ghana, Kumase, Queen Victoria, Sir Garnet Wolseley, Captain Glover, McCarthy, Colonel Colley, Asamoah Nkwanta, Kings Kofi Karikari, Osei Tutu, and Obiri Yeboa.

Armah's narrative dynamism is found in his subtle handling and consistent incorporation of oral tradition as stylistic forms of expression. **The Healers** is studded with oral material ranging from the griot's oral histories, to folk-tales, to the recounting of local beliefs and customs pertaining to the Asante people. Indeed, the use of history as subject matter of the novel in itself implies a reliance on oral narrative, for, as John Mbiti has remarked, "L'histoire: entre aussi dans la littérature orale africaine." (Mbiti, 1967:265). Furthermore, one of the most dominant features of the oral narrative technique is repetition. Since the repetition of certain sentences and particular words is ubiquitous in the novel, it is essential to our understanding of **The Healers'** oral expression that we outline its categories and functions. Considering the weight of significance given to patterned repetition and its frequency in the novel, repetition can be divided into two major categories: (1) repetition of identical words or groups of words like "division," "forest," "river," "water," "healer," "inspiration," "manipulation," "beneath the water," "under the water," "circumstances of fragmentation," "huge river," "river's flow," "side of the river" (pp. 5, 75, 92-108, 147-154), and (2) repetition of identical sentences or patterned sentences like "this was division," "she talked to him of anxiety," "she talked to him of waste," "she talked to him of despair," "she talked of gratitude," "she talked of fullness" (pp. 5, 67-68). More than the recurrence of patterned or formulaic expressions, this abundance of identical words and groups of words constitutes one of the major elements of the narrative. However, both categories have the same function and the same novelistic objectives.

The functions of **The Healers'** oral technique of repetition fall into three types: stylistic, didactic, and aesthetic. Stylistically speaking, repetition maintains the oral tempo of the narrative, while suggesting fundamental levels of understanding and meaning. For instance, the frequent interplay of identical words and patterned sentences like "division," "disease," "community," "healing," "this was division," suggests the novelist's preoccupation with the themes of division and unity. In many instances, the dynamic device of repetition becomes not only an organic constituent of narrative reflecting the novelist's attitudes but also a vehement expression of derision, irony, invective, and denunciation of the white man's racism and paternalism. The narrator's ironic praise of Sir Garnet Wolseley and Captain Glover in the following few examples of stylistic repetition is a scathing attack on these two men and a strong condemnation of their colonial policies: "The powerful Sir Garnet Wolseley," "Glover the godlike, Glover the white man descended among the black people to do magical wonders," "Here he was, the man who had gone along the mysterious Kwara...", "Here he was, the white man who could boast he could tell black men to do any thing...", "Here he was, Glover the father of the Hausa fighters, protector of loving slaves," "Here he was, Glover the glorious, boastful one...", "Here he was, the great white man," "Glover, this white sun; the magic god, this centre of their lives...", "Glover the magnificent, Glover the omniscient, Glover the father of the Hausas, Glover the redeemer of slaves...", (pp. 288, 255-263). Thus Glover is made ludicrous. With the technique of repetition Armah creates a "mythic" picture of Glover in order to ridicule his character and jeer at his colonial atti-

tudes and principles. Finally, through this technique, the reader learns that Glover is as much the target of the novelist's blistering attacks as Wolsey. In this way, repetition becomes not only a flexible device of reprobation but also an essential part of a whole range of oral patterning of Armah's "literary" style to enhance **The Healers** with the rhetoric of epic.

Apart from the overall design of its stylistic function, the author uses the technique of repetition to lend dramatic emphasis to the novel's didactic intent. By means of repetition, the narrator keeps the reader constantly on the alert, inviting him to believe what he says and to join him in contemplating and evaluating events. For instance, through repetition of words and sentences the novelist judges the characters' actions and comments on historical events. Most important of all, the rhetorical device of repetition makes explicit much that is implicit. Thus while describing the ritual games of remembrance and assessing their ethical importance among the people of Esuano, the novelist employs repetition to underline the right and the wrong aspects of their occurrence. In addition, repetition provides in a concise formula the moral lesson intended from an action or an event. Hence like Damfo, who uses repetition as a pedagogical method to teach Densu the art of healing, Armah uses it as a rhetorical and didactic means of persuasion to teach his reader the positive and the harmful "myths" of the Asante past as well as the various prospects of the future.

Beside its stylistic and didactic functions, repetition has an aesthetic value, which is a part of **The Healers** ordered and unified artistic structure. Such patterned repetition creates a series of cadences that reconciles opposites, defines responses, and advances the plot. Moreover, the prose rhythm produced by the sound-effects of repetition reinforces the griot's role of being the novel's "singer of tales".

Without being uncritical of the Asante past, **The Healers** views independent Ghana and Africa in general through the critical lens of the griot's telling of history. Such a method of narrating the story serves as a device for reinforcing the historical dimension by being told in the storyteller's way the griot's way. **The Healers** is a lasting masterpiece for its adaptation of African oral tradition into written fiction. Armah has written perhaps the most sophisticated West African example of historical narrative in the service of socio-political awareness. It speaks to the African reader with an authentic African voice--the griot's voice.

notes

1. Ayi Kwei Armah born in 1939 at Takoradi, in the Western Region of Ghana. He lived in several areas of his country. He attended Achimota School there and, one year at the Gordan School in Massachusetts. Then on scholarship, he majored in social studies at Harvard, he graduated *cum laude*. Later he was employed as a French-English translator in Algiers for the weekly **Revolution Africaine**. Returning to Ghana in 1966, he taught English in Navrongo School, then began script writing for Ghana Television. In 1967 he left Ghana again to participate in the graduate program at Columbia University, New York. Later he went to Paris where he worked as editor- translator for the Paris- based news magazine, **Jeune Afrique**. In 1968 he left Paris to become Visiting Lecturer in African Literature at the University of Massachusetts.

Assuredly then, his sojourns have substantially contributed to the writer's thought and literary expression. He has published five novels: **The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born** (1968), **Fragments** (1969), **Why Are We so Blest?** (1972), **Two Thousand Seasons** (1973) and **The Healers**.

2. Ayi Kwei Armah, **The Healers** (London: Heinemann, 1979). All subsequent numbers in parentheses will refer to page numbers of this edition.

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