

The Square Vs the Sphere: The Battle between Keepers and Sharers over the Inheritance of Oral Tradition in Ayi Kwei Armah's *KMT: In The House Of Life*

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Abstract: This article scrutinizes the transmission of oral tradition and knowledge about ancient Africa in Ayi Kwei Armah's *KMT: In the House of Life* through the confrontation between the Keepers and the Sharers. It reveals the epic battle which erupts between two blocs of African traditionalists: those determined to keep ancient knowledge about Africa into a restricted circle and those committed to sharing such a knowledge to the entire community. Building from a historical perspective which underscores the importance of oral tradition in knowledge transmission as evidenced by scholars such as Chinweizu, and from historical elements on the African continent, as documented by Cheikh Anta Diop, especially about ancient Egypt's links with West Africa, the study aims at exploring the transmission of such a tradition using a critical look, a necessary stance Armah constantly reminds in *The Eloquence of the Scribes* when it comes to the use of African ancient knowledge or its past. The analysis concludes into the necessity of adopting a cautious approach in the processing of African oral tradition as a source of knowledge, especially when it comes from griots working in royal courts.

Key Words: keepers, sharers, Yarw, Niani, oral tradition .

I. INTRODUCTION

The execution of Djeli Hor by the Niani Council is one of the grimmest and most saddening images *KMT* offers to the reader. From a modern society vantage point of view in which this story takes place, the act itself is hardly understandable. Indeed, it epitomizes the bloody confrontation which opposes two warring factions: the Keepers and the Sharers over the custodianship of African oral tradition. Hor's sentencing to death raises an acute debate on the accuracy of African knowledge as a source of sound information as it was still then passed from griots working for the royal court in Niani.

This paper is foregrounded on the assumption that fiction, and African literature in particular, can be used as a valuable material in the search for origins and future directions for Africans. Ayi Kwei Armah, a renowned African novelist and essayist, is mostly praised for his rigorous documentation about the African condition in his novels as Derek Wright [1] argues, and for his iconoclastic fiction, according to Ode Ogede [2], which challenges established literary conventions. Armah himself has even recently termed his work as "expository fiction" to highlight the rich documentation from which it springs. More plainly, he has labeled, *KMT: In the House of Life* [3], the novel we propose to analyze here, as an "epistemic novel". The epic battle it recounts and which erupts between two blocs of African traditionalists, the Keepers and the Sharers, is interestingly a contribution about the processing of African oral tradition as a vehicle of knowledge transmission in the remembering of the continent [4]. African scholars, such as Chinweizu in *Voices from Twentieth Century Africa: Griots and Town criers* [5], have highlighted the relevance of oral tradition as a vital means of information supply for Africans concerned about their history. It is such a tradition that finds ample voice into another African novel, Djibril Tamsir Niane's *Soundjata, ou, L'épopée mandingue* [6], which Armah consider as part of "the literary and historical documents" (Armah 148, [7]), where African past, through the feasts of emperors of the likes of Soundjata, is evoked with more nostalgia from what he calls an "African Glory school of thought" (180, [7]). However, even though these scholarly and fictional works stress the existence of some constraints impacting on the accuracy of African oral tradition, they often tend to overlook their real impact. African oral tradition processed without using a critical look incorporating such elements can often lead to misinformation as it is the case with the Niani traditionalists who, despite representing the official traditional,

recognized by scholars and working for the royal family, continue to supply flawed information about Africa's past.

This paper, using a historical perspective from elements in the explored novel and in other scholars' works from historians such as Cheikh Anta Diop [8], attempts to situate the existence of a "true" tradition on ancient knowledge about Africa while relating the battle which brings at odds traditionalists from Niani and Yarw. First, the analysis reveals, from Armah's earlier fiction, starting from *Two Thousand Seasons* [9], the existence of manipulators and inspirators who competed as two contending forces, standing as evil and good, whose positions and attitudes are later epitomized in the conduct of the Keepers and the Sharers. Then, it attempts to locate the origins of the rift which erupts between the Keepers and the Sharers in ancient Africa, precisely in the KMT times, as the story shows. Then using historical references explaining the settlement in west African of people from ancient Egypt origins, the analysis strives to highlight how Niani and Yarw reproduce the same rift which existed between these Keepers and Sharers in ancient times. The analysis ends with a call which urge Africans to adopt a critical look in the processing of oral sources in the search of the "true" tradition for a better understanding of their past and a clear formulation of their future.

II. MANIPULATORS VS INSPIRATORS

The fiction of Ayi Kwei Armah is replete with the dichotomy which exists between those he labels "manipulators" and those he calls "inspirators". This characterization pattern has emerged since the publication of *Two Thousand Seasons* where predators and destroyers are challenged by the *fundis* or the warriors led by Isanusi. The lethal confrontation between the forces loyal to the community and those seeking to break it ends into the execution of King Koranche, who turns out to be a sell-out, and the victory of the *fundis*, even if they will not be able to contain the foreign assault from the Europeans.

The pattern makes its way into *The Healers* [10] where we have the confrontation of two fighting blocks: royals and healers. The difference which distinguishes the two warring groups lies in their philosophy of life. Manipulators or royals are often wicked characters, only interested in their personal well-being and ready to use all means at their disposal to crush opponents. On the opposite, the healers or inspirators are selfless people, who value sacrifice, knowledge, and merit as a way to contribute into the making of the society. If the confrontation with the cruel force of the royal court in Esuano, epitomized by Ababio and Buntui, allows them to soothe their lust for power, albeit temporarily, it is ultimately the wisdom of the healers led by Damfo, Densua and Ama Nkroma which triumphs at the end of this novel. The rejection of the Esuano throne from the healers, who leave the city after the execution of Ababio, who is found guilty of the murder of the young prince, Appia, is a symbolic act which highlights the relationship inspirators entertain with royal power.

Armah further develops this theme of the relationship between evil and good through the deployment of characters such as Cynque and Asar in *Osiris Rising* [11] Here also, the manifestations of the traits of the manipulators and the inspirators resurface only to highlight the rapacious nature of Cynque and the sense of sacrifice, commitment and dedication from Asar. Moreover, what is striking in this novel is the appearance of the first sign of the circle with the half Ankh piece Cynque holds as a symbol which links him to some royal origins. Finally, Ama Tete, the tradition custodian, explains the full story of how Cynque's grandfather was given that piece as a summons to be sentenced to death by the council because he is involved in the slave trade (selling even kids – he had to fly voluntarily on a ship to America to escape death). She shows the full Ankh in a circle shape that was kept by the true members of the society. The reader therefore gets a glimpse about the egalitarian lifestyle that used to prevail in ancient Africa as Armah texts constantly allude to.

So far, to better develop the theme of the social and political organization of African societies which have apparently been driven into corruption and stratification, Armah strives in *KMT* to delve into the universe of ancient Africa, through the KMT civilization, to reveal the origins of the rift which comes to exist between the manipulators and the inspirators. This time, however, they are named the Keepers and the Sharers. They are represented through two evocative symbols: the Square or the Pyramid and the Sphere or the Circle. The clear explanation of the battle between the different forces (evil and good) in his earlier novels (*Two Thousand Seasons*, *The Healers*, *Osiris Rising*) we mentioned above to explain the different attitudes of his antagonistic characters finds an ampler space in *KMT* where their battle is narrated.

III. KEEPERS VS SHARERS IN ANCIENT TIMES

In *KMT*, to better situate the ready about the epic battle, Armah reimagines ancient Africa. The novel represents a universe in which Africa knew no royalty or hierarchy and describes how royal power came to be established. The novel documents the predynastic era and paints the Eden of a bygone society that was

established by the companions or the scribes. According to the records that Lindela and Jengo discover in their collaboration with Hor and Astw, ancestors lived in a society whose basic pillars were equality and justice. Its custodians were observers and thinkers, who through dedicated work, managed to establish a society of knowledge based on intelligence and justice (Maat and Jehwty). The records highlight that what helped KMT produce the best of knowledge is the work led by the scribes, or companions in the house of life, through close observation of the universe. They establish a companionship which enables to lead to one of the most prosperous times they have ever enjoyed as the text recounts (Armah 264, [3]).

At some point, however, this prosperous time in a classless society was challenged by the surge of some vices which emerged between the companions in the house of life. According to the story, a war “between the men of power from the South and the North” (Armah 274, [3]) erupted in the land. This is clearly an allusion to predynastic Egypt when Narmer rose to unite its upper and lower parts according to historians such as Cheikh Anta Diop and Théophile Obenga [12]. And then, a rift, a gully makes its way in the heart of the companions. What apparently starts as a conversation turns into an argument. The text recounts:

The rift from the heart of the companions has come from a conversation turning into an argument. There are wars in the land. The companions have long held that wars and killings are against our way. But there are some companions who see possibility of rapid movement in playing senet with the demons of war (Armah 273-274, [3]).

The gist of the argument which threatens the companionship and brings it at odds has to do with the interest some of the companions have in supporting one of the warring factions against the other. The companions are people endowed with the best and most accurate knowledge. When they put such a knowledge at the service of a cause, it will surely prevail against any opposing force. Another issue which accounts for the rift is the stance of each group when it comes to the use of their knowledge. There are those who want to keep the knowledge from the ordinary people, making it therefore elitist, and those who advocate for its natural *raison d'être*, which is to be shared and made accessible to any one regardless of his status and background. The narrator presents the argument in the following terms:

Conversations among companions turned more frequently on the question of what to do with the knowledge and the protection it brought. Some were for sharing; they saw sharing as the solution, the way to forestall disaster. And then there were those who did not see the need to share. They were for keeping the knowledge among those who planted it.... To those who argued for spreading the knowledge we gave them the name of the Sharers. To their opponents, anxious to keep the knowledge within the circle of privileged knowers, we gave them the name of Keepers (Armah 264-265, [3]).

From this passage, it clearly appears the establishment of the block of the Sharers of knowledge and that of the Keepers of mysteries. The latter believe the results of their work give them the right to put it at the disposal of a few people. They cannot understand why the others, they call the Sharers, want to popularize their hardly acquired knowledge. This is what the Keepers reproach to the Sharers:

The hypocrites have spoken; those for making knowledge free as air, the house of life an open home for every child, the well-bred and the unclean, the circumcised and the uncircumcised, the valley child and the desert child. All, they say, are to find nourishment for their spirits in the house of life, sharing labor as they share food, sharing knowledge as they share air. We say no (Armah 274, [3]).

The Keepers, as this passage highlights, are surely for limiting the access to knowledge to a selected few. In doing for, they introduce a new practice, still unknown to the house of life, the abode of the companions. Those they think are fit to be allowed in the premises are the lucky few. Access to that knowledge will make them belong to an elite, a privileged group which will maintain itself at the top of the pyramid. The world they envision is built on the foundation of a square with the establishment of a hierarchical system in which the person navigates according to the favors he is granted. Privilege and power are all about what they are aspiring to when they affirm:

Why should we accept the burdens of brute powerlessness just because nature forgot to make aristocrats and commoners and slaves itself? We who have the courage to embrace privilege, let us side with the strong of arm, because we are strong of heart and mind. Let us agree that nature is not

all balance; that nature shows us the bull's ferocity, the hippo's temper, the lion's ruthlessness is that there is this natural fight between the heavy bulk of people, patient, dumb, suffering, and the quicker fraction born to rise to power and ease. In spite of numbers, it is an unequal struggle; the poor people are many, but they are bound to lose. Why would you have us throw our weight on the loser's side? We belong to the winners. Let the sharers call them men of violence. We the keepers shall call them conquerors. Let the sharers continue to call them thieves and murderers. We shall call them nobles. We shall help them rise to eminence over all. And because we are their wings, we shall rise with (Armah 275, [3]).

As the passage indicates, the Keepers not only understand how they see the society, with the necessity to stratify it, but they are also aware of the importance of the support they intend to bring to the men of power. They have made their decision to side with the royal power. They are aware of the great advantage they have when they league knowledge with royalty. They will be the main architects who will help the men of power, they call conquerors, reach their goals of establishing a society of rulers and ruled. Their mission consists, in a way, into ensuring the priesthood of knowledge, keeping it to a privileged circle as they confess that they are "Keepers of Mysteries" (Armah 275, [3]).

On the opposite, the Sharers are at odds against such a worldview. They argue that the primary mission of the companions or scribes is the discovery and dissemination of accurate knowledge for the well-being of the entire community. They remain faithful to the ideal of the companionship. Such an ideal is anchored on the principle of intelligence and justice. Intelligence requires careful and dedicated work on every aspect of human life. Justice implies that no individual is left away from the outcomes of the produced work.

The rift which erupts between the two blocks leads therefore the Keepers to work with the royal power and even enjoy the luxury and the taste of the royal palace. There, they help the royal power to better rule the society through the performance of rituals. They also help organize the power in such a way that everyone accepts to be ruled according the standards they have set. The Sharers who refuse to join in what they consider an unwise move that is against their principles are led to destruction. First, they are invited to join the palace. When they refuse, the house of life is attacked and set on fire. It is not allowed to be rebuilt and even a decree is published to banish the existence of houses of life in the land. The only house of life which is recognized and allowed to operate is the Great House of life located inside the royal palace. This is how the companionship is forced to go underground. The Sharers, from then on, living under the constant threat of repression, require close examination before anyone is accepted in their tiny circle so as to avoid infiltration as they experience it with one companion (Armah 297, [3]). Then whenever a house of life makes a group of forty-two companions, half men, half women, the new ones are tasked to travel farther and open a new house of life.

Through these motions of the companions, which actually follows the migration waves from the Hapi (Nile) valley into other parts of the continent, we understand how companions come to live in places as far as in Niani, Yarw and other locations in West Africa. Armah surely, reconstructs here, the settlement of West Africa by migrants coming from the Nile Valley as he attempts to link his own origins to Ancient Egypt in his memoir, *The Eloquence of the Scribe* (Armah 29, [7]). Furthermore, scholars such as Cheikh Anta Diop, who has a strong influence on Armah, in *L'Afrique noire précoloniale* [8], have also demonstrated how west Africa was peopled from waves of migration originating from the Nile Valley. It is therefore not surprising that aspects of the KMT civilization are found in locations such as the former Soudan where the story takes place (Armah 125, [3]). And as Paul Tiyaambe Zeleza argues, "in West Africa, griots first emerged at least a thousand years ago and since then their role has change" (225, [13]).

IV. NIANI VS YARW

Living the time and space of ancient Egypt or Kmt, the story presents afterwards, albeit in a modern era fashion, a perfect replica of the relationship which the Sharers had with the Great House of the Keepers at the royal place. It shows, in details, the oppositions between two streams of traditions in a west African context. Niani, the place where people from Kmt descent come to live, is the seat of the royal power, the powerhouse and the center which represents the official voice of the tradition about knowledge on ancient Africa. Yarw, a small and quiet town at the periphery, the home of the Sharers, or the "mute traditionalist" (Armah 162, [3]) is unknown to the larger world although it remains the "true" repository of the best tradition of companionship. In Niani, we have the traditionalists, mostly known to the public. They are thought to inherit the tradition from ancestors. These traditionalists, also known as griots, or *djélis*, are official representatives of such a tradition.

In return, the traditionalists of Yarw who stand for the Sharers are even known to “refuse, no matter what the inducement, to talk to outsiders about their works” (Armah 126, [3]). The wary attitudes of the Yarw traditionalists, among which we have Hor and Astw, the two progressists characters, reminds the reader of the attitude of the Sharers who did their best to keep themselves safe from intruders and spies in ancient times. The difference between the traditionalists in Niani and those in Yarw is aptly described by Lindela on her visit with Jengo while they seek to convince Hor and Astw to join in their work of awakeners in the following terms: “We did not go to Niani. We know it’s the center for traditional keepers of knowledge trained to sing praise to power” (Armah 134, [3]).

It is relevant to point out the merit of *KMT* into raising the crucial issue of the credibility of the griots in Niani. In Africa, as Ruth Finnegan posits [14], the oral tradition is praised as an important source of knowledge through which history is transmitted. However, most of the time, the narration of the tradition goes unchallenged and is considered as a ready-made product to be used. What is often missed is that the knowledge from the traditionalists, comes mostly from royal power. And royal power shares only what enables it to maintain its stronghold. However, the rift which exists among the traditionalists, leading to the confrontation between the Keepers and the Sharers, reveals that such a tradition may not be that accurate. It is often flawed and biased from the truth. The official version of the tradition, which often sides with royal power is often a truncated story only served to please and entertain a system which aims at establishing a hierarchized society.

The royal power in Niani, along with its traditionalists or griots have inherited the knowledge from the Keepers, these companions or scribes who accepted in ancient times to establish themselves in the Great House of life at the royal palace. Accordingly, they are the carriers of the official history of the continent. Its griots, such as Mamadou Kouyate, are the vectors of knowledge transmission to the young generations. Their knowledge, which they only work out at to serve power, is largely disseminated, especially to highlight African royalty in past times they are nostalgic of as Astw observes when she states:

According to the court traditionalist, our people knew better days of great glory thousands of years ago, when there were kings of godlike power. They still dream of calling back those ancient days of so-called glory (Armah 148, [3]).

The Niani traditionalists, as stated above are mostly obsessed with royalty. In their narration of history, they only reflect the glory of kingdoms and empires and their architects. They don’t narrate the true history of the African people as would do the traditionalists or the Sharers in Yarw.

Armah chooses the name of Mamadou Kouyate only to have him as the repository of a flawed and truncated tradition which does not describe the real journey of the African people. In doing so, he manages to challenge ready-made assumptions about the value of canonized traditions in Africa through the voice of renowned griots mostly affiliated to royal power. Mamadou Kouyate, in Djibril Tamsir Niane’s *Soundjata ou L’Epopée Mandingue*, is mostly considered as a credible voice in the transmission of African tradition. When Armah brings him to play that role of censorship of the true African history that Djeli Hor recounts at the seminar, and in enhancing the execution of the Yarw traditionalist (Hor), Armah disfigures him and, to a large extent, all African griots working for royalty.

Armah, throughout the text, deliberately links Kouyate and, in extension, all the traditionalists from Niani to the tradition of the Keepers in ancient times. They possess millenary knowledge but only decide to transmit it within their inner circle, or at the best, share only what can advance the hold of royalty in Niani or keep the gleam of some ancient glory they expect still to live on. They oppose any attempt to share such knowledge in great day light to ordinary audiences as rules the oath that every traditionalist has to make after his completing his training or initiation. Their opinion is that the oath prevents traditionalists to do so while Hor’s point remains that the oath does not prevent sharing the knowledge they have obtained. All it states is that the sharer has to bear the consequence whenever he decides to break it (Armah 175, [3]).

V. THE SEARCH FOR THE “TRUE” TRADITION

As we learn the manipulation of the Niani traditionalists, it becomes interesting to locate the right repositories of the “true” African tradition. This is actually the difficult quest of Jengo and Lindela. To the general opinion, most researchers turn to Niani when they are interested into oral tradition. The Niani traditionalists hold what is considered to be the “established tradition”. They are the “established keepers” according to Hor (Armah 186, [3]). Therefore, they are the only valid channel which is allowed to talk to outsiders about knowledge of the past. When Lindela meets Jengo who informs her about traditionalists who

might be helpful to the work they intend to do, the young lady's (Lindella) first idea was Niani. Jengo responds to her that there is a smaller village, Yarw, where they might find what they are looking for. This posits that most of the documentation work so far carried out by academics working in African history has to do with the Niani group, which unfortunately does not share the "true" knowledge about ancient Africa.

So far, Jengo mentions that some attempts have been deployed to have the traditionalists in Yarw share their knowledge. Not only the approach used by such researchers was inappropriate but they were also fooled by the Yarw traditionalists. The latter's attitude is justified by the lack of trust and confidence on the intention of the researchers who are interested only by their own survival (money and personal success or praise). Their reluctance is also related to the way they are treated by the academics who, instead of considering them as participants, rather look at them as informants ((Armah 182, [3]). That is why Jengo himself does not manage to convince them in his first visit. He is somehow rejected by the shy welcome he receives and has to go back and look for a better grounding about the work he wants to carry out. That is how he meets Lindela and their second visit is a great success.

Jengo and Lindela manage to bring the traditionalists in Yarw, mainly Hor and Astw, out of their comfort zone thanks to the approach they adopt and which largely differs from the previous attempts led by other scholars. Such an approach, which owes its success through its participatory method ("We would like to sit with you, eat with you, sleep with you, live with in short share everything with you" – (Armah 138, [1]), is aptly explained by Lindela in her outstanding introduction of the project. Lindela's strong advocacy in the following lines is so evocative as she declares:

We've come to you because we think our history has to flow again, the longest of rivers, spreading silt of renewal. You here in Yarw already know a great deal of that narrative flow. What we propose is this: let us those of us with our minds focused on the search for that true narrative come together, for as long as it takes, lifetime upon lifetime, if necessary, to bring together all the many streams of our narrative diverted away from our common flow. Because it's in the great stream of that unifying narrative, lost in the confusion of European violence, that we need to bathe our consciousness at the beginning of a great awakening (Armah 134, [3]).

The insightful thoughts of Lindela highlighted in the passage above convince Hor and Astw that these two scholars have enough knowledge and conducted ample research to see the difference which lies between the Yarw traditionalists and those in Niani. It also shows Lindela and Jengo's level of awareness on the ugly face of a European centered education they are victim of and from which they seek to disengage themselves. Her speech also demonstrates a sense of duty, sacrifice and commitment to invest in a mission which is not limited in time and which will surely consume energy with no immediate material reward or intellectual distinctions. Hor and Astw therefore not only find their ideals endorsed by the two researchers but they also feel a spiritual connection which binds them to the mission of sharing knowledge for the advancement of the community. Before even Lindela ends her speech Hor collapses. Indeed, it is the discharge of Lindela's speech which makes Hor collapse as if she was unloading some heavy burden on him. The feeling Hor experiences makes the reader believe that he is marveled by the wit from which Lindela exposed the project and the depth of the connection which sparks between them. Besides, Astw observes afterwards that Lindela "did far more than try" (Armah 140, [3]) in explaining the project they come up with. Hor consider Lindela's speech as a gift as he declares:

You see, the words you spoke were not new to me. The talk of sharing, the behavior for sharing, for years I have known them as part of the language of awakened souls. Astw and I have spent our lives hoping to hear such words, perhaps one here, two, three there. It never seemed possible to me one day that a person of flesh and bones would come speaking the language of sharers. In any case, I had no way of knowing the day was so close. Do you understand, you spoke from inside my soul, and that frightened me. I'd look forward to hearing someone like you. Still, I was unprepared when it happened. I am sorry if I seemed upset. It wasn't that (Armah 152, [3]).

Indeed, as it appears above, to Hor and Astw, Jengo and Lindela are the new companions they were looking for quite a long time. They would be the "new sharers" as Hor labels them. They have decided to reject a fascist system of education, to conduct accurate orphaned research on issues so vital to the remembering of Africa. At some times they almost lost hope on seeing the long-awaited companions. As Astw points out:

Sometimes we wondered how we would recognize such new friends when they came. There were days when we were certain we would die with our knowledge unshared, our hunger for friendship buried with us. On better days, though, we agreed that there could be ways of recognizing the

sharers when they came. We would recognize them from the balance in the language they spoke, the balance in their behavior. When you came talking like the best of companions, it hit us that our waiting was over. It had taken years but when it happened it felt shockingly sudden (Armah 156, [3]).

It appears clearly that Hor and Astw's life has shifted constantly from hope to despair and vice-versa while waiting to see the new companions. They already know what would be their attitudes and could easily identify their traits in Jengo and Lindela.

The waiting and reluctance that defined Hor's life is grounded on a firm commitment. It consists into obtaining the guarantee that the sharing of the knowledge is worth of it. Actually, Hor is bound by the oath traditionalists take at the end of each circle of their initiation. The oath itself might be something traditionalists in Niani, west Africa, have brought in the practice so as to make sure that the knowledge is not shared with the larger public. In the copper plates Hor and Astw hand over to Lindela and Jengo for digitalization through photography (they hid them secretly in Yarw lest they fall on the wrong hand), which contain the story of ancient Africa, as copied by the jeweller, Amanfi Cham, after insects almost damaged the manuscripts, such a practice did not exist in the training of the traditionalists. It can be however envisioned that the victory of the Keepers over the Sharers would lead to the use of some conservative techniques which limit the sharing of knowledge hence resorting to the taking of the oath to keep the knowledge secret. Hor is ready to face the consequence but he is adamant to mention that: "It would be senseless to gather hidden knowledge, and face the risk of death and to reveal it, only to spill it in the lap of people bent on keeping it hidden" (Armah 156, [3]).

Hor actually explains that Yarw has been established as soon as the people came to settle in the area. Any traditionalist who is known to be curious enough to ask questions that challenge the order of things in Niani would be sent to Yarw. There, they are silenced and closely controlled by the royal power. In his remarks at the seminar, he also explains that when the people came in this region, the companions did not know royalty and used to live in an egalitarian way, mindful perhaps of the painful history which brought down the predynastic society in KMT to its knees. The stability of that society which lived according to the principle of the companionship was disrupted by another argument, as the same way it happened in the past around the Hapi River. Talking about the establishment of Yarw, Hor explains the following:

It seems there was a kind of argument among the first arrival here. The people of the pyramid were for setting up kingdoms, with nobles and priests and commoners and slaves. The people of the sphere said the system of royalty had brought us incalculable ruin and would bring us more in the future if we did not bury it. The people of the pyramid said the system of the sphere had brought us nothing (Armah 154, [3]).

The people who settle in this part of the continent were reminiscent, on all accounts, of the great havoc royalty wreaked on their ancestors. It may be assumed, according to the narrative, that all those who migrated there were companions running from the ancient chaos. But over time, as the remembrance fades, corruption creeps into the minds of some of them who naturally fall under the seduction of royalty. That's where the argument starts again. While the work of the royalists is easier to enhance, they build the main towns and, the other few, who believe into the sphere system, move away and establish the small town of Yarw. The traditionalists in Yarw cannot hold against the power of the royalists. All they are able to do is to manage "to keep the memory of the idea of change from dying out completely" while expecting the arrival of ready minds able to share it (Armah 155, [3]).

The Sharers in Yarw live their way with a mission of keeping ancient knowledge. They also hide the copper plates where the ancient narratives are encoded lest they fall of the hands of the Keepers or other improper hands. When the black people are assaulted by the Arabs who imposed their religion and culture, the memory of the Africans was again excised from its historical stream. As Djeli Hor recounts in his memorable speech at the seminar:

Every traditionalist since then [Arab conquest] has known when that excision of our vital memory was performed, and why. The inner lore of traditionalists, never before uttered in public, informs us that at the time of the bloody victory over our own royal lines achieved by Arab raiders and their converts to Islam, to help the usurpers strengthen their shaky rule, a meeting was held at which all traditionalists were told that if they insisted on telling our story the old way, they would have to accept the same fate as that suffered by our old ruler: death. For those intent on living, the price of life was this: we were to forget, in our public utterances, all mention of ancient origins, of

movement west or south from river bank to seashore, of any beginnings other the new beginnings brought us by the Muslim raiders (Armah 188, [3]).

The Arab conquest, as the passage above explains, heralds a new reality in the transmission of the African memory. Prior to that conquest, Sharers were just prevented from speaking the truth. With it becomes effective, not only all traditionalists are placed under the watchful eye of the conqueror but they are even obliged to limit and circumscribe the narration of African history to the beginning of the Arab conquest. Anything going further that period is forbidden to be uttered. The Niani royal house, even though it remains still acknowledged by the people, is almost an empty shell and its traditionalists, the likes of Mamadou Kouyate, have drifted far away from their original mission only to sing the praise of a lost royalty mixed with the Arab conquest around which they draw the African remembrance.

The knowledge Hor reveals to the audience at the seminar is the narrative of the “true” history of the African people. Hor, while aware of the consequence as he will pay the price, sticks to the original role of the traditionalist, the griot, the sharer, the scribe and the companion. It is the mission of thinkers and observers, of the custodians of the African narrative in its feats and failures. The role of the traditionalist is illustrated in the name he is given, the *djieli* or the griot. “Djieli” as means “blood”. The name is symbolic in that it offers a vital picture of their role in the society. The traditionalist’s knowledge is to the society, what blood is to the body. A society which aims at standing firm and rooted in its past has to benefit from the dissemination of knowledge from the traditionalists. When knowledge is shared to everyone, it allows the society to remain vigorous and ready to face its challenges and prepare its future as it is with the body, when blood flows in its different part. But when knowledge is kept to a group and is prevented to be carried away to other it is as if preventing blood to circulate in some parts of the body. It becomes sick and unable to offer the appropriate conditions so that it can unleash its full potential. This is what Hor recounts as he invokes the memories he has on his grandmother when he states:

One of the things I remember best was her telling me that to be a keeper of knowledge was to be like blood. Blood flows throughout the body, everywhere, bringing life and removing the seed of death. It makes no sense for blood in its movement to stop in any one place. It brings freshness to every part it reaches, and remove stale poisons. It helps the body throw away poison and stay healthily alive (Armah 152, [3]).

This metaphor which associates knowledge transmission to blood circulation in the body, underscores Hor’s conviction that knowledge is not something to be kept to a limited circle. It has to be shared so as to ensure the survival of a community. That is what motivates him to break the oath and pass the tradition to a generation he trusts, and, at the same time, to give to Lindela and Jengo access to that hidden knowledge in the copper plates so that they can share it and study it in their awakening mission. Hor believes that the best of gift is the gift of knowledge (Armah 152, [3]). It is the only means to establish lasting friendship through a companionship able to lift the people. His dream is to see a community free from hierarchy living on an egalitarian basis.

That is what leads Astw to give her pendant to Lindela. That gift in the form of a circle is so symbolic. Readers used to Armah’s fiction are already familiar to gift giving of symbolic materials. In *Osiris Rising*, Astw was given an Ankh piece from her grandmother Nwt who, despite living in America, finds a way to reconnect her granddaughter to Africa and Ancient Egypt. Here also, when Astw decides to give that precious pendant to Lindela, she expresses the acceptance of the scholars into the circle of the companions or the Sharers in a house of life.

The precious gift embodies the philosophy of the Sharers which stands odds to the way of life of the Keepers. Here the symbols of the circle and the pyramid face one another on a constant struggle. Although it may be easier for the Keepers to win the battle as the work of awakening remains a slow enterprise, the narrative voice sides with the vision of the Sharers and gives ample credit to Astw to show the difference which exists among the two blocks. The gift, according to Astw is a sign and a reminder, a “way of thinking about the world, our people, ourselves” (Armah 141, [3]). Before she hands it to Lindela, she shows how much value she grants it, caressing it for a while. She further explains what follows:

Look at it. It’s one circle enclosing the other, then another and another circle. A black circle, then a red one.... These circles, all of them, represent spaces for ourselves. Think of each circle as home, a resting place, for the soul we call our self. A soul may find the home that is the isolated self too

cramped for it. It moves on, seeking a place not too small, and not too large. When a soul finds that resting place, we say it's reached home (Armah 141, [3]).

As it can be seen, these explanations inform on the philosophy of life of the sharers. It moves from the inner self to the collective frame that is so vital to the life of any given people or society. The individual, though aware of his natural capacities, assets and singular talent, belongs to a larger frame. The relationships he has to maintain with that frame obeys to the different existent intricacies. That is what accounts for that circular sign and symbol on the life of the companions. The circular frame also implies that all the members inside are equal in access to knowledge and worldly life. It is the principle of balance which stands at the opposite of the pyramid worldview of the Keepers as Astw still explains when she states the following:

They [Keepers] look at the pyramid and they admire it, seeing it as a symbol of power that at some time was ours. They ignore the real meaning of the pyramid: the huge injustice, the lack of balance. Balance is the main measure by which we in this town judge what we do. Pyramids are part of our history, but in Yarw, we are not people of the pyramid. We remember something better, a symbol holding greater hope...The sphere, the circle. The static symmetry of the pyramid oppresses the great world underneath. The sphere is a natural sign of balance. It moves, and no part of it is set up over any other part. It is about balance, movements, change. Can't you the beauty of the sign? (Armah 148, [3]).

Astw's point, in the above paragraph, is a serious warning about royalty. Although she acknowledges that royalty is part of the story of the people, she hints at something better which existed before. The beautiful pyramids from ancient Egypt, however marvelous they stand, represent the ugly face of the capacities of the African people as they symbolize the apex of royalty built under the prevalence of injustice and the domination of some over the others. They result from huge human suffering. Even if they make today the pride of a continent grappling with a myriad of complex issues, Africa's truest heritage is to be found beyond the beauty of such monuments. It resides into the circle which represents that predynastic period in which the ancestors knew no royalty. It can also be seen that the prime interest of the people who migrated to settle in the western regions where companions were fleeing from the brutalities of royalty was about justice. But as Astw recounts (Armah 148, [3]), when some of them see the Joliba river, it reminded them of what happened around the river and their souls were contaminated by the loom of royalty which they ultimately establish. The others who stand true to the origins decide to move in Yarw.

So far, the battle between the Keepers and the Sharers seems to have always existed. Victory very often goes to the Keepers because what they seek to establish in the society is far easier than the huge task of reconstruction that the Sharers envision to carry out. When Lindela asked why the Sharers with such a noble ambition have always lost the battle, Astw makes the following relevant precision:

The good dream is too slow. What the traditionalists in this town want is to turn knowledge into the property of everyone, like air. But everyone sees it would take ages to bring about such an outcome. Meanwhile the nightmare is faster, and easier (Armah 149, [3]).

The warning issued above is a testimony of how, may be, an "untrue" tradition has been considered as the real history and heritage of the continent through the transmission of the Niani traditionalists. The latter are guardians of a narrative than champions royal power and limits the history of the continent to the arrival of the Arabs. Those who are the repositories of the true knowledge have been silenced and marginalized for such a long time. If Amanfi Cham did not have the genius to copy the narratives on the copper plates and Hor the courage to speak the truth and give the plates to Jengo and Lindela, this buried tradition would never be retrieved from where it lays dormant.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study aimed at situating Africa's inherited oral tradition as a source of knowledge to inform on the history of the continent using the epic battle waged between the Keepers and the Sharers in Ayi Kwei Armah's *KMT*. It reveals that most is what considered to be the official channel invested of the transmission of Africa's ancient knowledge is anchored on sustaining the interest of royal power and social stratification. The quest of power has been the main driver which has led companions away from their true mission, that is, working to acquire knowledge serving the interest of the community. In giving voices to two iconoclastic intellectuals and scholars, Jengo and Lindela, who are committed to reverse long-held views on Africa from European Africanists such as Christine Arendt and Jean-Pierre Badin who boosted themselves as experts

who fed from the Niani traditionalists, resort to a lesser known and yet reliable source of knowledge from the Sharers in Yarw, Armah's *KMT* manages to challenge the so-called orthodox carriers of the African tradition to lay bare their manipulations. The disfigurement of Mamadou Kouyate as the repository of a fake history is a warning about the necessity to process critically oral sources about the history of the continent. For, most of the time, they praise African history, especially records of African kings, kingdoms and men of powers without using that cautious look as epitomized in Djibril Tamsir Niane's *Soundjata, ou, L'épopée Mandingue*. With regards to social and political factors discussed above, in Armah's novel, two traditions have coexisted in Africa. That is the gist of Djeli Hor's warning to the audience in his final words about the existence of the two schools involved into the transmission of knowledge:

The first is the official school that hands down tradition the way power wants it, mixed with lies. The smaller is the school of souls unwilling to live by lies. For centuries, it lay dormant, unable to find a living path to truth, unwilling to risk paths leading to straight death, no matter how true (Armah 192, [3]).

Bearing in mind this remark, it is important to remind here the cautious approach, Africans, scholars and researchers have to adopt when studying the continent from the prism of oral tradition. This is a way to challenge a long establish habit of taking as evident truth everything coming from the oral tradition. Any study of Africa's past and history should be anchored on a critical look to inspect the accuracy of knowledge acquired from the voices of the oral tradition. A critical analysis and a close scrutiny are prerequisites into carrying the work of awakening and remembering of the African continent.

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