

Cultural Diversity as a Safeguard against Static Identity in Mary Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa and West African Studies*¹

Bechir Chaabane
Majmaah University, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

Travel is not unsusceptible to the ideology in force since its journey and focal incidents are shaped by the spirit of the era. During the Victorian age, travel writing sponsored the imperial expansion by providing new markets for British products, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. In this aura, Africans are often presented as primitive, lacking history and culture. Unconventionally, Mary Kingsley gives the lie to this representation by exposing Africa as a land of cultural diversity and Africans as heterogeneous people with cultural specificities. The eminence of the cultural difference in African society is strategically placed by Kingsley to point at the static and second-class identity imposed on Victorian women in the 19th century. Approaching the native African culture differently can be read as a hedge against the static identity imposed on Victorian women at home.

Keywords: travel writing, Africa, Victorian age, cultural diversity, religion, spirituality, identity.

¹ The author would like to thank The Deanship of Scientific Research at Majmaah University, Saudi Arabia for the financial grant received in conducting this research.

Travel writing partly involves a translation of a highly subjective attitude towards the object of encounters: the other with all its configurations, namely, rendering the personal experience of travel. It traces the movement of the traveler across geographical, cultural, political and linguistic spaces. Beyond self-discovery, the traveler brings back stories for their readers, giving room for the culture of the other to voice itself. Andrew Hadfield states that the venture of travel “involves a series of reflections on one’s own identity and culture, which will inevitably transform the writer and will call into question received assumptions, including a sense of wonder at the magnificence of the other, or reaffirming deeply felt differences with a vengeance”.² Possibly, the unreciprocated and inequitable interaction patterns between the self and the other are not ideology-free.

Travel writing is not immune from ideological forces and the spirit of its age. In the course of the 19th century, expansion became a major aspiration for the European countries. Travel writing endeavours to adhere to a convention of some sort. In line with Tzvetan Todorov’s statement, “the form of disclosure is connected to the ideologies in force”.³ Peter Hulme also points to this ideological touch in travel writing by reminding readers that “the word adventure originally unified two areas of activity- economic acquisition and heroic action”.⁴ Unexpectedly, as a Victorian travel writer, Mary Kingsley through her *Travels in West Africa* 1897 and *West African Studies* 1899 is unconventional, since she encounters and portrays black Africa differently from the preceding travel writers. She dissociates herself emphatically from the general trend of nineteenth-century travel writing by avoiding the systematic stereotyping of Africa as a land of oddity and Africans as aberrant people, lacking spiritual and moral refinement. In fact, the popular attitude towards Africa is presented in Joseph Conrad, Rider Haggard, Henry Morton Stanley, David Livingstone and many others as the Dark Continent and its people as primitive and barbaric.

More often than not, *Heart of Darkness* inscribes the natives as beast people capable of animalistic behaviour: “A continuous noise of the rapids above hovered over this scene of inhabited devastation. A lot of people, mostly black and naked, moved about like ants”.⁵ The text also maintains:

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die. They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now,—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom.⁶

² Andrew Hadfield, *Literature, Travel, and Colonial Writing in English Renaissance, 1545-1625*, Oxford, Oxford UP., 1998, p. 1

³ Andrea White, *Joseph Conrad and the Adventure Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 16.

⁴ Cited in Sidonie Smith, *Twentieth-Century Women’s Travel Writing*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2001, p. 183.

⁵ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 1899, London, Penguin group, 1902., p. 21-22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

To put his psychological trauma into action, Marlow turns “Africa and Africans” into a big circus marked by a sinister performance and textual violence. Doing so, he dehumanizes Africa and Africans. Native people are presented as slaves forced to work till extreme tiredness and death. The myth of the “Dark Continent is established during the transition from the main British campaign against the slave trade..... to the imperialist partitioning of Africa which dominated the final quarter of the nineteenth century”.⁷ Edward Said considers the substantiation of the myth of the Dark Continent as a discourse of cultural hegemony involving strategies of power and subjection, inclusion and exclusion to validate the enlightenment of *mission civilisatrice*. At home, culture might often seem endangered by anarchy: through Chartism, trade unionism, socialism and feminism. Abroad, the British culture is safeguarded by silencing the conquered race.⁸ White women are themselves excluded and marginalized in the process of the cultural dominion.

Mary Kingsley sounds aware of white women's exclusion in the Western cultural exchange. She is against the preaching of the current novelists and missionaries stating that Africans are childlike, inferior, secular and non-religious. Once, she mentions: “nothing strikes one so much, in studying the degeneration of these natives, as the direct effect that civilization and reformation has in hastening it”.⁹ Instead of justifying the subordination of Africans, she sustains their equality in terms of spirituality and religiosity: “the African treats his religion much as other men do: when he gets slightly educated, a little scientific one might say, he removes from his religion all the disagreeable parts”.¹⁰ She differs from many late Victorians believed in the omnipotence of the Christian way as the only civilising course as Christianity breeds sexual inequality. Deconstructing the binarism of the West versus all aims at overturning the hierarchy in order to find new ways of thinking is no longer monitored by previous gendered classifications.

The long-standing confrontation between men and women over self-materialization engineers the defamation and the degradation of women with regards to religious aspects, leaving them always in the background. In terms of the Christian belief, “‘God the Father’ has been a dominant concept . . . ; the masculine has associations of strength, power and dominance”.¹¹ Allyson Julé goes so far to argue:

Christianity has been using patriarchal language for centuries. On the surface, language, pictorial representations and iconography have been male dominated. Arguments have been put forward suggesting that ‘the fatherhood of God is and must remain the predominant Christian symbol; it is not a closed or exclusive symbol but is open to its own correction, enrichment, and completion from other symbols such as mother’. Elizabeth Johnson sees this as improving the father symbol, but there is no female equivalent. She says ‘the feminine is there for the enhancement of the male, but not vice-versa: there is no mutual gain’. It is only recently that the Church has allowed women into the senior ranks but language has changed very little. ‘The new priestesses have to deconstruct the old hierarchy and system of communication if they want a more

⁷ Patrick Brantlinger, *Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent*, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 12, No. 1, *Race, Writing, and Difference* (Autumn, 1985), pp. 166 -203, p. 166.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 167

⁹ Mary Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa: Abridged and Introduced by Elspeth Huxley*, (1897), London, Dent & Son, 1976, p. 158.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 158-9

¹¹ Allyson Julé, ed, *Gender and the Language of Religion*, London., Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 11.

holistic gendered God, though to some 'deconstruction within theology writes the epitaph for the dead God'.¹²

The French feminist Simone de Beauvoir confirms this view when she asserts that in Genesis, Eve is depicted as made from what Bossuet called "a supernumerary bone" of Adam.¹³ Religious segregation is also attached to biological foundations. Menstruation, for instance, dictates a ritual treatment of women as it is evoked by Niza Yanay and Tamar Rapoport:

In Judaism, the ancient laws of impurity in regard to menstruation are known as the laws of niddah, and their ritualized form as the ritual of conditions, to enlist the meaning of niddah to their moral interests. In times of old, it was forbidden for women in a state of niddah to enter the site of the holy Temple or to eat meat from holy offerings, just as men suffering from various skin diseases or secretions were banned from the Temple. Yet, even after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Roman emperor Titus in 70 B.C., the laws of niddah retained their power, with a shift in meaning from a state of impurity related to sacrifices to a state of impurity related to sexual prohibitions in the private family sphere. Today, the laws of niddah are known as the laws of 'Family Purity.' When a woman is called a niddah, it practically denotes, in the language of the rabbis, that 'she is forbidden to her husband' and must avoid any sexual contact with him, including affectionate behavior. Jewish men and women alike are called upon to strictly adhere to the practice of separation, abiding by the detailed instructions and regulations, to ensure that the laws of niddah are applied with rigor by every woman. In this schema, patriarchal oppression is inscribed within religion which helps to make woman innately a subordinate being.¹⁴

In this schema, "the laws of niddah" in Judaism with respect to menstruation bolster the patriarchal oppression on the basis of a religious back up to make woman inherently a subsidiary being.

Inconsiderate of this religious-based sexism, Western travellers and early missionaries, most often used to be men, magnified the African barbarism so as to justify its strong evil effect. Samuel Baker, for instance, degrades the African spiritual life to a sheer ludicrous paganism: "without exception, they are without a belief in a Supreme Being, neither have they any form of worship or idolatry; nor is the darkness of their minds enlightened even by a ray of superstition. The mind is as stagnant as the morass which forms its puny world".¹⁵ More significantly, a host number of anthropologists such as Charles de Brosses, Edward Tylor, and James Frazer virtually rejected the African religion in its entirety. Early missionaries themselves were serving the colonial government and worked their best to put into effect the governmental policy. They anchored on the burden of Christian men to help the aboriginal people to secure God's salvation. James Henderson, principal of the Scottish educational institution at Lovedale, claims that "missions must embrace 'world utility,' that is, the economic and social well-being of Africans and of South Africa as a whole. They must strive to Christianize all of African culture, and the African personality as well".¹⁶ In the

¹² Ibid., p. 12.

¹³ Cited in Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1953, p. 15.

¹⁴ Niza Yanay and Rapoport Tamar, "Ritual impurity and religious discourse on women and nationality", *Women's Studies International Forum*, 20, 1997, pp. 651-663.

¹⁵ Cited in Kwasi Waridu, *A Companion to African Philosophy*, New York, Blackwell Publishing, 2004, p. 355

¹⁶ Richard Elphick, *The Equality of Believers*, Charlottesville and London, University of Virginia Press, p. 65.

1890's, Rudyard Kipling gave the imperial challenge its own "evangelical turn" as he instructed young Britons to take up the "White Man's Burden".¹⁷ According to this humanitarian attitude, tropical countries are not adequate for settled habitation by whites. Europeans cannot survive their climate or breed their children there.

Mary Kingsley sounds less devoted to the promises of the missionary work as well as the White Man's Burden. The work of missionaries exceeds simply the spreading of a religion to an utter transformation of lifestyle, some sort of Westernization. The self-centred and dogmatic attitude of the missionaries prevents them from wholesale assimilation of the native Africans' customs and manners, leading them to distort their lifestyle instead. Rejecting the Eurocentric theories available to her, Kingsley believes in the appropriateness of African systems of religion and law to the African setting. She never hesitates to divulge the harshness of the imposed Christian belief on these rustic and simple-minded people: "in places on the coast where there is, or has been much missionary influence, the trouble is greatest, for in the first case the natives carefully conceal things they fear will bring them into derision and contempt, although they still keep them in their innermost hearts".¹⁸ Africans give reverence to objects that they have come to admire as having particular qualities, binding the physical world to the spiritual one. The missionaries fail to fathom the communicative aspect of these fetish objects in the African mindset. The African fetish objects spring from their eternal quest to comprehend the universe and to come to terms with the forces that control their inner life. Kingsley, herself, often articulates her quest as a search for the hidden truth, often slippery but by all means existent. By overlooking the European preconceptions, «at first you see nothing but a confused stupidity and crime, but when you get to see - well! . . . you see things worth seeing",¹⁹ she attempts from her reading and her travels to understand the African society and its frame of reference from within, to rectify the inaccurate views held about Africa and Africans at the Victorian time.

In this light, she takes polygamy, for instance, as a cultural dictate rather than a repressive institution. The demonization of polygamy proceeds from the catering to natural male desires to exercise boundless power over women symbolized by the East, Africa and colonial spaces overall. Much like colonial spaces, women are represented as spectacle body to be looked at, place of sexuality and object of desire. Some cultural critics, including Edward Said, have argued, the institution of the harem, more fantastic than real, is a source of relentless voyeuristic interest in the West, a vigorous metaphor connoting an orientalist fascination with a debased and hypersexualized 'East' that treats its women as eroticized "houris".²⁰ Similar to Africa, the Orient is connected to a "mother, evil seducer, licentious aberration, life-giver".²¹ Jules Michelet, for instance, figures the orient as the 'womb of the world'.²² In the 19th century, oriental women were seen as powerful seductresses. When he refers to "the womb", Michelet probably thinks of Genesis with Eve, the temptress. By analogy, Africa is likened to a blank space as a the female womb. It is an evil

¹⁷ See WM. MacMillan, *The Road to Self-Rule, A Study in Colonial Evolution*, (London, Faber, 1959)P. 166.

¹⁸ Mary Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, op., cit., p. 161

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 103

²⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York, Random House, p. 207.

²¹ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, London, Routledge, 1995., p. 124.

²² Cited in McClintock, op. cit., p. 124.

seducer, “smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage...with an air of come and find out”.²³ Unlike this imperial analogy, polygamy proved to be feasible in Kingsley's frame of mind:

Polygamy enabled a man to get enough to eat. . . there are other reasons which lead to the prevalence of this custom beside the cooking. One is that it is totally impossible for one woman to do the whole of housework- look after the children, prepare and cook the food, prepare the rubber, fetch the daily supply of water from the stream, cultivate the plantation. The more wives, the less work, say the African lady, and I have known men who would rather have had one wife and spent the rest of the money on themselves.²⁴

Kingsley thinks polygamy is a healthy symptom in the African society in so far as it promotes their lifestyle and not an evidence of moral decadence. McEwan judges the missionary trial to eradicate polygamy as a distressing act, as it is endorsed by McEwan who thinks “that polygamy was a fundamental aspect of the structure of West African societies and that the attempts by missionaries to eradicate the custom were causing distress and disruption within these societies”.²⁵ Accordingly, unlike the missionaries who consider polygamy a slavery institution or a form of cohabitation, Kingsley takes polygamy as a cultural artifact dictated by the nature of the African society in itself as well as its socioeconomic factors.

Not less importantly, polygamy is presented as a preventive safeguard or a safety measure for traders since it ensures their security. As the most prevalent way to get rid of enemies is the cooking pot and what goes into it, the trader needs to have a wife in each village to look after his safety. The text of Kingsley reads:

But trader is not yet safe. There is still a hole in his armour, and this is only to be stopped up in one way, namely, by wives. . . . Now the most prevalent disease in the African bush comes out of the cooking pot, and so to make what goes into the cooking pot . . . safe and wholesome, you have got to have someone who is devoted to your health to attend to the cooking affairs and who can do this like a wife? So you have a wife- one in each village up to your route. I know myself one gentleman whose wives stretch over 300 miles of country, with a good wife base in a coast town as well.²⁶

She goes on to ascertain that the African woman is the temple of security for the African man and a barometer that gives his life a sense of stability and a certain balance. She states: “security can lie in women, especially so many women, the so called civilized man may ironically doubt, but the security is there, and there only, on a sound basis, for remember the position of a travelling trader's wife in a village is a position that gives the lady the prestige”.²⁷ Kingsley's assertion that “the security is there” is very telling. It is intended to men, at large, and to the Victorian men, in particular, who suspect the whole process, namely that polygamy exists to satisfy male sexual

²³ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, op. cit., p. 19.

²⁴ Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, op. cit., p. 80-81.

²⁵ McEwan, op. cit., p. 160.

²⁶ Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, op. cit., p. 136-137.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

appetites. By analogy, it is a yelling cry from Kingsley to speak out the repressed stories of Victorian women, to bespeak a new image of women throughout as a stronghold of security, deserving more appreciation.

Much distinct from Conrad, Haggard and many others, Mary Kingsley treats the African people as subjects with historical and cultural heritage. Though the exchange with the black men such as her close identification with the Fans may harm her reputation as a woman, she dares to interact with them without a lot of precautions. From the outset, Kingsley gives the lie to the preconceptions already compiled from men travel texts. She states: “one by one I took my old ideas and weighed them against the real life around me, and found them either worthless or wanting”.²⁸ She goes on to absolve herself from falsification and imagination: “I have written only on things that I know from personal experience and very careful observation and stressing my own extensive experience of West coast”.²⁹ With a shrewd eye for details, she attempts to keep faith to her promise: “now I am ambitious to make a picture, if I make one at all, that people who do know the original can believe in- even if they criticize its points and so I give you details a more showy artist would omit”.³⁰ In this vein, Catherine Barnes Stevenson puts: “with a keen eye for detail, Mary Kingsley recorded the dress, food, culture, architecture, and religion of various Africans she encountered and with sympathetic understanding she tried to penetrate ‘the dark forest’ of the African mind”.³¹ Time and again, Kingsley testifies to Catherine Barnes’ thought: “but before I enter into a detailed description of this wonderful bit of West Africa, I must give you a brief notice of the manners, habits and customs of West Coast Rivers in general, to make the thing more intelligible”.³² Thus, in her representation of the African people and space, she attempts to exempt herself from racial prejudices of the cultural representation of the nineteenth century.

To bypass racial prejudices, Kingsley suggests a conduct to do justice to Africans. Again, she claims:

As it is with the forest, so it is with the minds of the natives. Unless you live alone among the natives, you never get to know them; if you do this, you gradually get a light into the true state of their mind-forest. At first you see nothing but a confused stupidity and crime; but you get to see well as in the other forest-you see things worth seeing. But it is beyond me to describe the process.³³

She goes on admitting:

I confess that the more I know of the West coast Africans, the more I like them. I own I think them fools of the first water for being the process of being; but I fancy I have

²⁸ Ibid., , p. 15.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 80.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 17.

³¹ Ibid., p. 103.

³² Ibid., p. 23.

³³ Ibid., p. 34.

analogous feelings towards even my fellow countrymen when they go and violently believe in something that I cannot quite swallow.³⁴

Though Alice Blunt and McEwan charge her with an essentialist racial approach while referring to the African character,³⁵ the texts of Kingsley revoke such a contention throughout as it is marked in the last quotation. Kingsley studies the African on the ground of social differences rather than on a biological ground for the manners, conventions and stories are part and parcel socially constructed. In a reply to the *Spectator* 1885, she writes: "I do not like to think that I have done anything to bring the African into further disrepute".³⁶ Undoubtedly, overgeneralization is a colonial stereotype as it is connected with freezing the natives in time and space, denying them any cultural specificity, which has nothing to do with Kingsley's attitude. To the credit of Cheryl McEwan, "the very notion of the 'African' in travel narratives testifies to a cultural bias that blinded the reader to ethnic and individual character. The construction of a mythical 'African' meant the denial of any diversity of individualities within this category".³⁷ Kingsley's notion of "Africans" is an all-encompassing category, involving men and women. In the preface to *Travels in West Africa*, she admits: "I have great reason to be grateful to the Africans themselves- to cultured men and women among them".³⁸ At times, she employs the adjective, "African", to designate the African man: "the African treats his religion as much as other men do".³⁹ Even in this case, the term African is not used pejoratively to degrade the African man, but to project his cultural specificities as an individual subject.

Religion and spiritualism are signposts for the cultural specificities of the sub-Saharan Africans. In an article entitled, "Histories of Religion in Africa", Louis Brenner defines religion "as the field of cultural expression that focuses specifically on communication and relationship between human beings and those (usually) unseen spiritual entities and/or forces that they believe affect their lives".⁴⁰ Religion, in this case, is not a self-contained system, but it reflects the pluralism and heterogeneity of the African society. "Spirituality" as defined by Carlyle Fielding Stewart "represents the full matrix of beliefs, power, values, and behaviours that shape people's consciousness, understanding, and capacity of themselves in relation to divine reality"⁴¹ and this spirituality has induced the survival of African customs. The Christian missionaries play a significant role in destabilising the pluralistic identity of Africans by imposing christianity on them. The British historian Terence Ranger's more general discussion on religion, development and identity in Africa, strongly defies the organic model of society and religion. Before the advent of modern colonialism, there was not, in his view, an organic collectivity but a creative and resilient pluralism. Commenting on the current situation, he argues that 'the real identity crisis in Africa is not found in changes from a single traditional 'frozen' identity to a bewildering pluralism. The real identity crisis

³⁴ Ibid., p. 96.

³⁵ Cheryl McEwan, *Gender, Geography and Empire: Victorian Women Travelers to West Africa*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000, p. 96.

³⁶ In Elaine Freedgood, *Victorian Writing about Risk: Imagining a Safe England in a Dangerous World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 134.

³⁷ McEwan, op. cit., p. 94.

³⁸ Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, op. cit., p. 17.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 158.

²⁹ David Westerlund, *African Indigenous Religion and Disease Causation*, Boston, Brill, 2006, p. 2

⁴¹ Interview with H. Patten, London 4 August 2003.

is exactly the other way round. It is produced by the change from a creative pluralism to single frozen identities.⁴²

In this line of thought, Christianity is intended by white regimes to give credence to the ostensible aim of bringing civilisation, justifying the oppression of black people. However, social and cultural changes should be taken place in order that Africans would be disposed to adopt Christianity.

Kingsley differs from many late Victorians who staunchly believed in the supremacy of the Christian way as the only civilising course along with a supposedly more tolerant attitude to other religions. Her tolerance for differences across several groups is revealing. It validates her knowledge about the religious diversity and the contests it presents to the stance of some writers on Victorian religion who claim that, "the religious diversity that Victorians knew, however, was almost exclusively the 'internal pluralism' within institutionalized British Christianity".⁴³ Likewise, "many Victorians would have been puzzled by references to 'other religions' within the context of British society apart from the presence of Judaism".⁴⁴ From this promontory position in late Victorian context, Mary Kingsley was an unwelcome rebellious voice. Significantly, she would have been vexing to many of her British audience with respect to the way in which her autonomous travelling as a single woman in Africa would also work against the grain of the governing ideologies about the Victorian woman's morality. By studying the African moral institutions, something very unfeminine, which directly goes against the established male dominance at that time, Kingsley revolts against the systematic stereotyping of the Victorian society in terms of relegating women and the natives to the bottom of the scale.

Fetishism is one of the Victorian stereotypes, downgrading the Africans as spiritually inferior to Europeans. The study of fish and fetishism is one of Kingsley's primordial objectives to set out for West Africa. Once her text reads, "my main aim in going to Congo Français was to get up above the tide line of the Ogwe River and there collect fishes; for my object on this voyage was to collect fish from a river north of the Congo".⁴⁵ She methodically adds:

The religious ideas of the Negroes, i.e. the West Africans in the district from the Gambia to the Cameroon region, say roughly to the Rio del Rey (for the Bakwiri appear to have more of the Bantu form of an idea than the Negro, although physically they seem nearer the latter), differ very considerably from the religious ideas of the Bantu South-West Coast tribes. The Bantu is vague on religious subjects; he gives one accustomed to the Negro the impression that he once had the same set of ideas, but has forgotten half of them, and those that he possesses have not got that hold on him that the corresponding or super-imposed Christian ideas have over the true Negro; although he is quite as keen on the subject of witchcraft, and his witchcraft differs far less from the witchcraft of the Negro than his religious ideas do. The god, in the sense we use the word, is in essence the same in all of the Bantu tribes I have met with on the Coast: a

⁴² Ibid., p. 193-194

⁴³ Gwilym Beckerlegge, "Followers of 'Mohammed, Kalee and Dada Nanuk': The Presence of Islam and South Asian Religions in Victorian Britain", in John Wolfe (Ed.) *Religion in Victorian Britain*, Vol. 5., Manchester University Press in association with The Open University, Manchester & New York, 1997, p. 222.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 223

⁴⁵ Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, op. cit., p. 23.

non-interfering and therefore a negligible quantity. He varies his name: Anzambi, Anyambi, Nyambi, Nzambi, Anzam, Nyam, Ukuku, Suku, and Nzam, but a better investigation shows that Nzam of the Fans is practically identical with Suku south of the Congo in the Bihe country, and so on. They regard their god as the creator of man, plants, animals, and the earth, and they hold that having made them, he takes no further interest in the affair. But not so the crowd of spirits with which the universe is peopled, they take only too much interest and the Bantu wishes they would not and is perpetually saying so in his prayers, a large percentage whereof amounts to 'Go away, we don't want you.' 'Come not into this house, this village, or its plantations.' He knows from experience that the spirits pay little heed to these objurgations, and as they are the people who must be attended to, he develops a cult whereby they may be managed, used, and understood. This cult is what we call witchcraft.⁴⁶

While the collection of rare species of fish is a basic objective of her journey, the study of the tribes within Africa in terms of their customs and practices, what she herself labels "fetish" is no less important. James W. Fernandez claims that, "whilst the primary rationale of Mary Kingsley's expedition was the collection and preservation of new species of fish, she often extended the taxonomy metaphor to the African people and African life; he and it were of different species and entitled to description and preservation".⁴⁷ Indeed, the religious practice is central to the African life and although there are no inscribed codes, its practiced morals exert community control and tribal solidarity. Ethnic groups wrestled and subjugated each other but their traditional religious beliefs led them to overstep conflicts and cultural differences. The African world is overwhelmingly religious. In virtually most activities, there is a religious touch such as in marriages, funerals and childbirth, especially the case of twins. The African culture underlines and voices the depth of the African emotional life and its spirituality. Fetishism implies a universal tendency or an assimilation of inanimate stuff used by savages believing that these objects have magical or supernatural powers.

Anne McClintock gives her word on the notion of fetish as it is indicated in the following passage:

If the medieval discourse on the feitiço was associated with a discipline of the body and denunciation of illicit popular rites, by the fifteenth century the term had entered the realm of empire. Portuguese explorers trading along the West Coast of Africa used the term feitiço to describe the mysterious amulets and ritual objects favored by the African peoples they encountered on their voyages.⁴⁸

By spotlighting the African religion, Kingsley gives the matter its due reverence, distinguishing herself from Victorian men travel writers who degrade the African religion as a stretch of witchcraft and attribute salvation exclusively to Christianity. Thereof, Katherine Frank in her biography of Mary Kingsley considers that the study of the fetish by Mary Kingsley within *Travels in West Africa* and the later *West African Studies* verges on being a "spiritual

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 167-168.

⁴⁷ James W. Fernandez, *Bwiti: an Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1982, p. 60.

⁴⁸ McClintock, op. cit., p. 186.

autobiography".⁴⁹ Kingsley expresses "her deep respect to all forms of religion in West Africa"⁵⁰ while calling for a substitute for the denigrating term fetish: "I sincerely wish there were another name than fetish which we could use for it, but the natives have different names for their own religion in different districts and I do not know what other general name I could suggest".⁵¹ Her respect for the African forms of religion emanates from her understanding of the distinctive role of the religious spirituality in the African's casual life. Her understanding of the role of the religion in the African life is partly illustrated in A. B. Ellis' frame of mind:

With most races which are still relatively low in the scale of civilisation, it is found that their religion.... is frequently the main-spring of their actions. Religion is not with them, as with civilised peoples, a matter outside one's daily life; it is a subject which affects and influences in some degree almost every action of their daily life, and which is closely interwoven with all their habits, customs and modes of thought.⁵²

Ellis calcifies the differences between the two cultures in terms of religion, for where Europeans consider religion out of touch with their daily life; to the African it shapes "almost every action of their daily life". However, he denies the spiritual meaning of religion in African life. Africans are concerned with the surface, not the substance of things, he believes. Otherwise, Kingsley voices the significance of religion in the casual and spiritual life of the Africans: "the life in Africa means a spirit".⁵³ African religious belief systems affect all aspects of the African community life as well as their spiritual upliftment. Doing so, Kingsley brings an aspect of the African cultural practice to history after it has been distorted by the colonial intrigue.

Kingsley's manoeuvre may be read as "a cultural resistance to imperialism" and patriarchy in Said's words, which is defined as a form of "nativism used as a private refuge . . . to fight against the distortions inflicted on the [native's] identity . . . to return to a pre-imperial period to locate a 'pure' native culture".⁵⁴ Hence, native cultural practices, whose destruction the imperialistic enterprise is consciously keen on, are revived in Kingsley's texts to provide a new perspective of approaching the native culture. The same subversive practices are well developed in native African writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Bessie Head, Amos Tutuola and many others, inscribing their fascination with their native culture with its wealth of cultural artifacts. Kingsley comes close to intersect with native African writers in the same postcolonial axes of resistance to the imperialistic project since they are oppressed by the same subjugating hand. Likewise, they struggle to break free from the coercion and tyranny of the colonial machine by fashioning new identities for themselves as free subjects rather than colonized and subordinate denizens.

The scramble for Africa for Victorian women overall and Mary Kingsley in particular may be considered as a quest for new identities away from the Victorian social and sexual fetters and

⁴⁹ Katherine Frank, *A Voyage out: the Life of Mary Kingsley*, London, Tauris Parks Paperbacks, 2005, p. 107

⁵⁰ Mary Kingsley, *West African Studies*, London, Macmillan and CO, 1899, p. 113

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 114

⁵² Alfred, B., Ellis, *The Tshi-Speaking Peoples of the Gold Coast of West Africa: Their Religion, Manners, Customs, Laws, Language ect*, London, Chapman & Hall, 1887, p. 9.

⁵³ Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, op., cit., p. 171

⁵⁴ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London, Vintage, 1994, p. 275.

shackles, an identity forged through a narrative tension, translating an embodied experience of encounter. The textual representation of these new identities caters for distinct forces such as the audience expectation, the imperialistic context and the feminine question which are carried by short stories that challenge the official historical record. For instance, Kingsley considers "Trade English. . . exceedingly charming"⁵⁵ as it "employs no genders".⁵⁶ Therefore, it is claimed through a process of disclosing the cultural hegemony of the white people in the colonial setting of Africa and this equips Victorian women travel writers with a worthwhile moment to claim agency at home after demonstrating their aptitude to manage with what Achebe calls the "crossroads of culture".⁵⁷ Doing so, they point at the patriarchal colonial scheme behind the imperialistic mission in Africa, which, per se, subjects them to the same trial of oppression at home. In a word, Mary Kingsley's admission of the cultural pluralism of the sub-Saharan African societies can be read as a vindication against the patriarchal imperial strategy imposing on the natives and women at large static identities and freezing them in the course of history.

⁵⁵ Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, op., cit., p. 163

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 162

⁵⁷ Crossroad of culture implies transitional period that manifests . . . the great creative potential. It's an area of tension and conflict . . . of power and possibility. In Bernth Lindfors, ed., *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1997, p. 80.

References

Primary Sources:

- Kingsley, Mary, *Travels in West Africa: Abridged and Introduced by Elspeth Huxley*, (1897), London, Dent & Son, 1976.

- -----, *West African Studies*, London, Macmillan and CO, 1899.

Secondary Sources:

- Allyson, Julé, ed, *Gender and the Language of Religion*, London., Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

-Beckerlegge, Gwilym," Followers of `Mohammed, Kalee and Dada Nanuk': The Presence of Islam and South Asian Religions in Victorian Britain", in John Wolffe, Ed., *Religion in Victorian Britain*, Vol. 5., Manchester University Press in association with The Open University, Manchester & New York, 1997.

- Brantlinger, Patrick, Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 12, No. 1, *Race, Writing, and Difference* (Autumn, 1985), pp. 166 -203.

- Conrad, Joseph, *Heart of Darkness*, 1899, London, Penguin group, 1902.

- De Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1953.

- Ellis, Alfred, B., *The Tshi-Speaking Peoples of the Gold Coast of West Africa: Their Religion, Manners, Customs, Laws, Language ect*, London, Chapman & Hall, 1887.

- Elphick, Richard, *The Equality of Believers*, Charlottesville and London, University of Virginia Press, 2012.

- Hadfield, Andrew, *Literature, Travel, and Colonial Writing in English Renaissance, 1545-1625*, Oxford, Oxford UP., 1998.

-MacMillan, WM., *The Road to Self-Rule, A Study in Colonial Evolution*, (London, Faber, 1959).

-McEwan, Cheryl, *Gender, Geography and Empire: Victorian Women Travelers to West Africa*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000.

-Fernandez, James W., *Bwiti: an Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1982.

-Frank, Katherine, *A Voyage out: the Life of Mary Kingsley*, London, Tauris Parks Paperbacks, 2005.

-Freedgood, Elaine, *Victorian Writing about Risk: Imagining a Safe England in a Dangerous World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

-Lindfors, Bernth , ed., *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1997.

- McClintock, Anne, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, London, Routledge, 1995.

- Said, Edward, *Culture and Imperialism*, London, Vintage, 1994.

- Smith, Sidonie, *Twentieth-Century Women's Travel Writing*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

- Waridu, Kwasi, *A Companion to African Philosophy*, New York, Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

-Westerlund, David, *African Indigenous Religion and Disease Causation*, Boston, Brill, 2006.

- White, Andrea, *Joseph Conrad and the Adventure Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

-Wilberforce, William, *The African Slave Trade and its Remedy*, (2nd Ed. 1840) , London, John Murray, 1839.

-Yanay Niza and Tamar, Rapoport, "Ritual impurity and religious discourse on women and nationality", *Women's Studies International Forum*, 20, 1997, pp. 651-663.