

**William F. Purcell**

**CHRISTIANITY BREWED IN AN AFRICAN POT:  
READING CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S "THE SHIVERING"**

**ABSTRACT.** This article discusses Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's story, "The Shivering." It examines how the text affirms the transformation of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa from a foreign religion undermining traditional life into what Simon Gikandi has called a "crucial part of the social and cultural fabric of postcolonial [African] societ[ies]" throughout the continent. It pays particular attention to the convergence between what Laurenti Magesa has termed the "official" Christianity of Western missionaries and the "popular" Christianity of the African Instituted Churches as each move towards becoming a religion that is both genuinely African and genuinely Christian.

Key words: African Christianity, Religiosity, Pentecostalism.

The conclusion of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's story, "The Shivering," finds the main character attending a penitential mass at a Catholic church in Washington, D.C. Noting how subdued such services are in America, Ukamaka reflects on how it would be different in Nigeria: the priest waving a "vibrant green branch of a mango tree" that he would "dip in a bucket of holy water" held by "a hurrying, sweaty Mass server, ... splashing and swirling, holy water raining down [on] people ... [who] would have been drenched. ... [S]miling and making the sign of the cross, *they would have felt blessed*" (166, emphasis added). This scene at once captures the appeal of Catholic ritual to Igbo religious sensibilities, it demonstrates the ways in which Christianity has addressed and adapted itself to those sensibilities, and it points to the extent to which Christianity has penetrated and become, in Simon Gikandi's words, "a crucial part of the social and cultural fabric of" Nigerian (and African) societies

(112). The story, in addition, offers a perceptive examination of the convergence of two different Christian traditions, one of European origins and the other of African origins.

Susan VanZanten Gallagher has suggested that “[o]ne of the most significant but little noted contexts for [reading, discussing and] teaching” contemporary African literatures “is the recent explosive growth of Christianity in this region.” Indeed, the twentieth century has been a time of tremendous growth for the Church in the Global South, and particularly in Africa, which has become the fastest growing Christian continent on the planet. During the twentieth century the Christian presence in Africa has expanded from a mere 9.2% of the population in 1900 to an estimated 45.9% in 2000 (Barrett, Kurian and Johnson 13): and if the statistics are limited to the non-Arab regions south of the Sahara, then the number is nearly 60% (Pocock, Van Rheenen, and McConnell 134). In Nigeria during this period the Christian population grew from 1.1% to 45.9% (Barrett, Kurian and Johnson 549). What is particularly striking is that the vast majority of this expansion came in the postcolonial period: in 1900 there were approximately 10 million African Christians; by 1950, when African nationalism and the independence movements were coming to the forefront, this number had tripled to 30 million—and a significant part of that growth was among the so-called African Initiated Churches (AIC). By the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the number of Christians has increased tenfold to an

estimated 360 million, and scholars estimate that by 2025 Africa will have over 600 million Christians, becoming the largest Christian continent in the world both in terms of percentage of the population and in sheer numbers. Indeed, already by the 1950s we can say that Christianity was well along the way of transforming itself from a foreign religion intervening in and undermining traditional life into Gikandi's "crucial part of the social and cultural fabric of postcolonial societ[ies]" throughout the continent (112).

The reasons for this explosive expansion of Christianity are complex. Still, scholars like Kwame Bediako (a Presbyterian theologian) of Ghana, Nigerians Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator (a Jesuit priest-theologian) and Peter Nlemandim DomNwachukwu (a Baptist minister), and Tanzanian Laurenti Magesa (diocesan Catholic priest-theologian) all begin by noting that African peoples are inherently religious and spiritual in nature (DomNwachukwu 11, Bediako 176-77), that a "strong, profound sense of the divine ... pervades the[ir] ordinary lives" (Orobator 140-41), that religion for Africans is not "an approach to life' directed by some book[,] some dogma, or some formal theological perspectives and prescriptions; rather it is "life itself, where a distinction is not made between religion and other areas of human existence" (Magesa 25). That is, African religion is (for lack of a less condescending term) a primal religion in which every aspect of life as it is lived, whether it be planting and reaping; hunting and gathering; procreating, rearing and educating children; or engaging communally

in the political, judicial, social and economic life of the village or clan are all religious acts. These scholars further suggest that many of the characteristics of Traditional African Religions across the continent have made African peoples particularly receptive to the Christian message because, in their view, Christianity as it originated in the Hebrew world and subsequently was incubated in its North African and Ethiopian Coptic varieties (and in fact its pre-Enlightenment European incarnations as well) blossomed precisely because it was germinated in similar religious and cultural milieus; that is, societies organized around similarly primal religious systems. (The hypothesis rings true when we consider the fact that Ethiopian Coptic Christianity, which was isolated and insulated from both Medieval European Scholasticism and the Enlightenment, is among the oldest continuous Christian traditions.) Harold Turner in particular identifies these characteristics as 1) belief in a Supreme Being ultimately above all else; 2) a strong sense that humans are weak, fragile, finite, sinful, and in need of a power not their own; 3) belief in a spirit world populated by both good and evil spirits, which is more powerful and 4) with which humans can form relationships; 5) belief in the afterlife and the close proximity of the ancestors which this implies; and finally as these latter characteristics imply, 6) that we humans live in a sacramental universe in which there is no sharp dichotomy between the physical and spiritual worlds. Rather,

the two exist in a coterminous relationship, locked in constant interaction (described in Bediako 93-96).

Given this natural religiosity of African peoples in general and the subsequent rapid expansion of Christianity throughout the continent in the contemporary period, it is not surprising that Christianity, missionaries, and the Bible have long been recurring subjects in colonial and postcolonial African literatures, nor that the stories, novels and plays by African writers have frequently been populated with African Christian characters. However, there has also been a tendency among secular Western critics of African literatures, particularly early on, in Gallagher's words, to "simplistically [equate] Christianity with imperialism and oppression, glibly reading any textual references to the church, missionaries, the Bible, or theology as manifesting either a virulent anti-Christian hostility or a profoundly critical irony." In doing so, she says, they have failed to notice that many of the prominent writers of the so-called first generation like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in fact are drawing on a specifically African Christianity in often sophisticated, nuanced, dialogical and syncretic ways. This, too, should not be surprising since most of these writers, like Achebe and Soyinka, are (at least nominally) second-generation Christians who were raised in Christian homes and educated in mission schools or, like Ngugi, came into intimate contact with

Christianity in these schools and, for a while at least, considered themselves Christians.

If Christianity has indeed become a part of the cultural fabric for the first and second generation of writers, this is even more so true for the third generation writers, of which Adichie is representative. Adichie has said that she sees religion in Nigerian society as “a huge force” that is both “so easily corruptible and yet so capable of doing incredible good” (“Footsteps” 15). She has also said that understanding religion and faith are so essential to understanding modern Nigerian (and African) peoples that it inevitably features in some way in everything she writes (“Footsteps” 15). Indeed, religion, especially Christianity and particularly Catholicism, is an important element in her fiction. At times it becomes a central thematic subject, as in her debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, which focuses on a Catholic family and is a seething criticism of missionary Catholicism and hypocrisy, yet also a redeeming affirmation of an Igbo Catholicism. At other times it is present in the background, in the lives of her characters, as in “The Shivering,” shaping their worldviews and both influencing and directing their moral choices. Occasionally it appears only referentially, in bumper stickers on passing cars or on billboards as reminders of just how ubiquitous Christianity has become in the lives of ordinary people. In all of these cases, Adichie’s fiction is a testimony of the extent to which Christianity has penetrated Nigerian society.

“The Shivering” is one such story, focusing on two characters, Ukamaka and Chinedu, who represent different faces of Nigerian Christianity; faces that Laurenti Magesa would label “official” Christianity and “popular” Christianity (9). Ukamaka is an upper-middle-class Princeton graduate student and cradle Catholic. As such she is clearly representative of adherents of the so-called established churches, Magesa’s “official” Christianity, that were brought to Nigeria by European missionaries and whose dogmas of faith, theological constructions, and liturgical practices have been incubated for nearly two millennia in the European intellectual and cultural milieu. Chinedu, in turn, is a construction laborer illegally in the United States and a Pentecostal. The variety of Christianity he embraces is more closely identified with the AIC that form Magesa’s “popular” Christianity. These are churches that for the most part broke away from those initially established by European missionaries, largely over cultural differences and practices and, on the surface at least, have historically been looked down upon by the mainline denominations as syncretistically incorporating many characteristics of traditional African religion. In turn, the changing relationship between the two characters through the course of the story parallels and becomes a metaphor for the gradual convergence of these two Christian traditions as both move towards becoming a religion that is both genuinely African and genuinely Christian.

Adichie has on numerous occasions talked about the place of Catholicism in her own life and the place of Christianity in contemporary Nigerian life as well. Like Ukamaka in “The Shivering,” she is a cradle Catholic who, she said in one interview, as a child was “drawn to religion” and particularly “drawn to the drama” of Catholic traditions (“A Conversation” 88). As an adult, she says, she has become something of a “cafeteria” or “liberal Catholic” who is not always in agreement with the Church’s teachings (“A Conversation” 90-91; “Footsteps” 15), yet at the same time has said that her Catholic identity is something she cannot deny: it is something she was born with, “has taken ownership of” and “can never get rid of.” Rather, she has said, “Catholics will leave the Church, but it’s still there. I don’t know that I can ever run away from it” (“Nigerian Identity”; “A Conversation” 91). That is, while she may be in disagreement with aspects of the institutional Church, she has said that for her there remains much she admires and loves about it: among these things are “the rich rituals, the traditions, the commitment ... to social justice and scholarship as well as the sort of outward-looking faith that holds to some of vision of a fairer world” (“Nigerian Identity”).

Adichie also stresses that her attachment to Catholicism is not merely a personal predilection. Rather, she agrees with the religious scholars (e.g. Bediako 176-177; Orobato 140-141) that Africans in general (and Nigerians in particular) are very religious, that Nigeria is a “spiritually teeming” country in



which everybody embraces some religious identity (“A Conversation” 88). She notes, for example, that among her own Igbo people a typical Sunday greeting would involve questioning whether the other has yet been to church services (“A Conversation” 88), pointing to the very Catholic expectation that weekly church attendance is assumed.

Pentecostalism, as well, she has said is especially important, as aspects of Pentecostal spirituality penetrate all Nigerian classes and transcend sectarian divides, becoming almost a unifying characteristic of Nigerian Christianity (“In Conversation”). This she credits to the fact that all people in Africa, in Nigeria, whether adherents of either “official” or “popular” Christianity, or indeed Islam or traditional religions, are “very aware of the presence of spirits,” that we humans “coexist with other beings in a way that’s very present” and that this awareness gives to African Christianity a sense of immediacy that at times makes Western Christianity appear tepid by comparison (“A Conversation” 89). It is, in turn, this sense of the immediacy of God that permeates “The Shivering” and gradually draws Ukamaka (and her Catholicism) back towards the richness, the beauty, and the vitality of her African spiritual heritage.

To briefly summarize the story, Ukamaka, a young Nigerian-Igbo woman and graduate student at Princeton University, is going through the ending of her relationship with her boyfriend Udenna, a Westernized modern Nigerian man who is secular, ambitious, materialistic, and narcissistic. Living together in their

graduate student housing, Ukamaka had assumed that their relationship would ultimately lead to marriage and children. However, as he begins planning his return to Nigeria to take his place among the elite, Udenna informs her that their relationship has become “staid” and in fact has been over for months (149). It is that word “staid” that particularly shocks her, driving her to the street where she eventually wanders into a Catholic church and encounters a priest, Father Patrick, whose kind words to her initiate her return to Catholic practice.

The story opens with Ukamaka following on the Internet details about a fatal airplane crash in Nigeria, on which her ex-boyfriend may have been a passenger, and also reports of the death in Spain of Nigeria’s First Lady, the result of complications following cosmetic surgery. Chinedu suddenly appears at her door, saying that he recognized her name on the mailbox as a Nigerian name and asks her to pray with him “about what is happening in [their] country” (143). Slightly stunned, she hesitatingly lets him in. He then takes her hands and begins to pray “in that particularly Nigerian Pentecostal way that made her uneasy” (143). His prayer goes on for quite some time, invoking the name of Jesus as he catalogues the earthly struggle with demons and evil spirits whom the Lord has bound up and cast into the sea, calling on “Jehova God” to cover, purify and protect all of Nigeria with the precious blood of Jesus. As Chinedu’s prayer continues Ukamaka suddenly experiences the eponymous involuntary shivering throughout her body that calls to mind a similar experience she had had years

earlier as a devout teenager while praying the rosary, which released at that time an “outpouring of incomprehensible words in the middle of a Hail Mary” (144). She recalls that at that time she was “sure that the white-cool feeling that enveloped her was God” and wonders now if this new shivering was also caused by the hand of God.

After the prayer their conversation touches on various aspects of Chinedu’s faith, highlighting its differences with Ukamaka’s more humanistic, anthropocentric, and rational post-Enlightenment sense of religion as it touches on such subjects as his conviction that the recent tragedies in Nigeria are God’s warnings to people and His punishment for sin and corruption; his belief in the need for God to directly “take control” of Nigeria and “save our country” from the human corruption, civilian and military, that has persisted since independence (145, 152); his assurances that “God is faithful” to those who pray and will intervene to protect Udenna from the crash; and later, when Ukamaka receives word that Udenna had in fact been scheduled to be on the doomed flight but missed it, his further conviction that this was the direct intervention of God in response to their prayers (albeit the prayers came after the fact).

Throughout this initial conversation Ukamaka is alternately put off and amused by Chinedu’s seemingly simplistic faith. As already noted, the narrator points out that she is “made [...] uneasy” with his Pentecostal manner of prayer (143). Her Westernized, humanistic, and rational worldview cannot accept

Chinedu's very Biblical faith in a proactive God who intervenes directly in human affairs, arguably giving preference to some individuals while ignoring others. To her such a God "doesn't make sense" (147, 149) precisely because such a God cannot be explained (or contained) by human reason. For Chinedu this does not present a problem because for him "God always makes sense but not always a human kind of sense" (147). Ironically, his position is very similar to that of Father Patrick, the priest at Ukamaka's Washington parish who also tells her that God very often doesn't make sense (148, 149). Ukamaka and Chinedu also discuss her struggle with her faith as she journeyed from being a devout teenager attending daily Mass to a modern skeptic—which he sees as a "crisis of faith" though she denies that—and her emergence from this romantic crisis as a renewed churchgoer.

Their relationship then develops over the course of what is probably a number of weeks, Ukamaka becoming something of a chauffeur, cook and caretaker for Chinedu, preparing and sharing meals with him, taking him shopping, and even chauffeuring him to his own church on Sunday mornings before going to hers. During these conversations Ukamaka opens up about her relationship with Udenna and, eventually, the enigmatic Chinedu also confides in her about his own failed gay romantic relationship with an equally secular, worldly and narcissistic lover who is also the son of a so-called Big Man back home, and then about his present immigration difficulties as he awaits

deportation. At this point Ukamaka confides in him about her experience of shivering when they had prayed together, which she tries to explain rationally as anxiety but he insists was a sign from God (164). Once again she finds his faith simplistic, unintellectual, and emotional—and recognizes these as the very reasons she herself had stopped going to Church years earlier. But she also recognizes that it was Udenna’s similar labeling of their relationship as “staid” that ultimately brought her back to Church (165). She subsequently promises to help him with his immigration difficulties and convinces him to join her this one time at her Catholic services, the story thus concluding with Ukamaka’s reflections already cited on the differences between Catholic services in the US and Nigeria.

It seems to me, at least, that the story in part is an examination of the idea advanced by most religion scholars that, in order for the Gospel to take root and flourish among a people it must be encountered within their specific cultural context, which obviously includes the parameters of their particular world view. Further, I would add, the story suggests that the traditional African world view, with its belief in the existence of good and evil spirits who are present and active in the physical world—a worldview not unlike that in which early Christianity was incubated—provides, for Africans at least, far more fertile soil than contemporary Western culture. And, I would suggest, Ukamaka’s failed

relationship with Udenna functions in part as a metaphor for the contemporary African encounter with contemporary Western Christianity.

Udenna, as mentioned earlier, is a Westernized, secular, materialistic, arrogant and narcissistic individual who laughs at and snubs other Africans whom he considers beneath himself (149, 151). Ukamaka, in fact, concludes that he would be “amused” by someone like Chinedu (149). Udenna is in many respects Frantz Fanon’s colonized individual who rejects his roots and embraces the values of the West. Ukamaka is initially attracted to him because of his physical appearance (he is 6 feet 4), his social and economic status (he is a UPenn graduate and works on Wall Street), his sophistication, and his potential position among the elite of Nigerian society. He is, however, emotionally cold in his relationship with Ukamaka, dismissive of everything important to her that is NOT about him, never telling her that he loved her because he found such notions to be “unoriginal” and merely a “cliché” (153). In retrospect, she says, he was “always struggling to be different, even when it didn’t matter. It was as if he were performing his life instead of living it” (153).

If Ukamaka is also Westernized, it is not to the same degree as Udenna. For sure, she still holds to some very traditional expectations from their relationship, particularly marriage and children. And, while she shares in many of his contemporary hopes and expectations, she has a passion for and dedication to their relationship that he is totally lacking. It is ironic that he terms

their relationship “staid,” the word that shocks her, because it is in fact his lack of passion and commitment that makes it staid. Nevertheless Ukamaka struggles with letting go of the relationship, refusing, for example, to put away his picture (158) or telling Chinedu that letting go is not such simple deal to stop “loving such an asshole” (158), and becoming extremely angry when Chinedu suggests that their relationship (even from her side) was never really about love (161-62), a truth she initially finds it too painful to admit.

Her attachment to Udenna mirrors the contemporary Nigerian elite’s attachment to Western ideas and ways, including the sort of Western religiosity that expects God to be “unambiguous” and conform to human reason (165). It is a religiosity that can in many ways be seen as staid, lacking passion and enthusiasm precisely because God has been, if not mythologized, at least distanced from daily life, and the struggle between good and evil spirits reduced to a metaphor for the inner human struggle for perfection. The final scene, in turn, offers a comparison as she watches Father Patrick “walking down the aisle flicking holy water on people with something that looked like a big saltshaker,” thinking about how “subdued” such services are in American churches, how in a Nigerian church the aspergillum would have been replaced by a “vibrant green branch of a mango tree that the priest would dip in a bucket of holy water held by a hurrying, sweating Mass-server; how he would have stridden up and down, splashing and swirling, holy water raining down; how the people would have

been drenched; and how, smiling and making the sign of the cross, they would have felt blessed” (166). It is a scene, as rich as any that Chinua Achebe might compose (i.e. the Festival of New Pumpkin Leaves, Chapter 7 of *Arrow of God*), that affirms the authenticity, beauty and power of Catholic ritual interpreted through, in this case, Igbo culture.

In the end, then, it is not the theological arguments or dogmas of Catholicism that draw Ukamaka back to the Church. Rather, it is something at a deeper level, something that speaks to her soul as an Igbo; as the eponymous experience of shivering during prayer—not once but twice, and the earlier experience within that very Catholic context of praying the Rosary—points to, just as the Gospel has touched and enthused other Africans across the continent.

The story, then, is essentially a comparison of two competing religious traditions, both claiming to be Christian yet both built upon very different worldviews—and each regarding the other with a degree of disdain. For, just as Ukamaka is “uneasy” with the Pentecostal nature of Chinedu’s prayer and finds his ideas about the nature of God irrational (at least initially), he likewise dismisses her Catholic beliefs and practices as so much “unnecessary kneeling and standing and [ironically] worshipping of idols” (164)—the very same condescending criticism “official” Christianity had long made of its “popular” rival. Nevertheless, these are two traditions on a gradual course towards



convergence. Both have much to teach each other, if and when they can put their rivalries and mistrust aside.

Scholars such as Kwame Bediako (176-77) and Agbonhianmeghe Orobator (140-41) remind us that the African peoples and their cultures are spiritual in nature. Throughout much of the continent that traditional spirituality has been infused with and transformed by Christianity, so much so that, as Simon Gikandi has already acknowledged, Christianity has already become “a crucial part of the social and cultural fabric of postcolonial societ[ies]” throughout the continent (112)--to the extent that Africa today is well on its way to becoming the largest Christian continent on the planet. As critical readers we need always be conscious of this. Otherwise, we pay these writers serious disrespect and do their works grave disservice.

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