REVUE INTER-TEXTUAL

ISSN: 2663-239X

Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences

Revue semestrielle des Lettres et Sciences Humaines du Département d'Anglais adossée au **Groupe de recherches en Littérature et Linguistique anglaise (GRELLA)**
Université Alassane OUATTARA, Bouaké

Numéro 12 juin 2026

www.intertextual.net

ISSN : 2663 – 239 X

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Revue semestrielle en ligne des Lettres et Sciences Humaines du Département d'Anglais adossée au Groupe de recherches en Littérature et Linguistique anglaise (GRELLA)

Université Alassane OUATTARA, Bouaké

République de Côte d'Ivoire

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Numéro ISSN: 2663 – 239 X

Lien de la Revue: www.inter-textual.net

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INITIATION: A TRADITIONAL FORMAL LEARNING SYSTEM IN ARMAH'S SELECTED NOVELS

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Abstract: This study explores Armah's representation of structured learning in traditional African societies through **Two Thousand Seasons**, **The Healers**, and **Kmt: In the House of Life**. It analyses the selected works through the lenses of Frantz Fanon's, and Kwame A. Appiah's perspectives on postcolonial theory. Contrary to views of precolonial education as informal, Armah depicts organised systems with specific goals, instructors, and curricula. Learning takes place in initiation schools, training villages, and specialised communities, blending practical skills with moral, spiritual, and cultural instruction while fostering cohesion and identity. By highlighting these integrated systems, Armah reclaims indigenous pedagogies, challenges colonial definitions of formal education, and offers insights for postcolonial educational reforms rooted in African traditions.

Key words: Africa, community, curriculum, Formal education, practical skills.

Résumé : Cette étude explore la représentation, par Armah, de l'apprentissage structuré dans les sociétés africaines traditionnelles à travers Two Thousand Seasons, The Healers et Kmt: In the House of Life. Elle analyse les œuvres sélectionnées à la lumière des perspectives de Frantz Fanon et de Kwame A. Appiah sur la théorie postcoloniale. Contrairement aux visions qui considèrent l'éducation précoloniale comme informelle, Armah dépeint des systèmes organisés, dotés d'objectifs précis, d'instructeurs et de programmes définis. L'apprentissage se déroule dans des écoles d'initiation, des villages de formation et des communautés spécialisées, combinant compétences pratiques, instruction morale, spirituelle et culturelle, tout en favorisant cohésion et identité. En mettant en lumière ces systèmes intégrés, Armah réhabilite les pédagogies endogènes, remet en cause les définitions coloniales de l'éducation formelle et propose des pistes pour des réformes éducatives postcoloniales ancrées dans les traditions africaines.

Mots-clés : Afrique, communauté, programme, éducation formelle, compétences pratiques.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental pillar of human development and social organisation. Across different cultures and historical periods, it has taken various forms to respond to the needs of society. In African traditional communities, education has long existed as a structured process, even before the advent of Western-style schools. Contrary to common assumptions, the training of individuals in these societies followed a formal pattern, with clearly defined goals, methods, instructors, and locations. The present work uses Ayi Kwei Armah's novels – *Two Thousand Seasons*, *The Healers*, and *Kmt: In the House of Life* – as powerful literary lenses to investigate the formalised features of education in traditional African societies.

By analysing these literary works, this study seeks to deconstruct and challenge narrow definitions of formalised education and broaden the understanding of its forms in African contexts. Yatta Kanu stresses the necessity for education "to be based in the wisdom, teachings, and traditions of the continent's ancestors, particularly in light of the irrelevance of colonial education to the lives and needs of Africans."(Kanu 2007, p. 67) Supporting Yatta, John K. Marah recognizes that "the education that was given to the African youth fitted the group and the expected social roles in society were learned by adulthood," (Marah 2006, p.15). He raises the specificity of education in African contexts.

The study analyses the selected works through the lenses of postcolonial theory, mainly endorsing Frantz Fanon's, and Kwame A. Appiah's perspectives. I echo Fanon presentation of decolonisation as reclamation of communal consciousness and an antidote to colonial alienation. While for Appiah the work aligns with his critique of static, monolithic "authentic" tradition and recognition of internal negotiation. As for the methodological approach, it is rooted in literary analysis and close readings. The analysis first describes the structure and characteristics education in traditional Africa through initiation, the traditional formal school.

1. STRUCTURE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF FORMAL EDUCATION IN TRADITIONAL AFRICA

This section defines formal education within traditional African contexts, highlighting its organized nature and the structure that governs learning processes as portrayed by Armah in the selected works.

1.1. Nature of Formal Education

According to Grajcevci, A. and Shala, A., "formal education is an organized education model, structured and administered by laws and norms, and subject to strict curriculum objectives, methodology and content. Generally speaking, this form of education involves the instructor, students and the institution." (Grajcevci and Shala 2016, p. 120) Formal education is a well-organized process that imparts knowledge to the trainees. Grajcevci and Shala support that it is a form of education requires the existence of some identifiable features. Their position is corroborated by Johnson M. and Majewska D. who point out some key features through which one identifies a formal type of education. They posit that "Learning in formal systems is generally hierarchic (i.e., based on learning objectives that are organised into linear progressions). Institutions and educators have timetabling responsibilities and employ direct teaching behaviours" (Johnson and Majewska, 2022, p. 9). To them, formal education organises learning in a hierarchy. It is recognisable through the establishment of objectives, the existence

of educational infrastructures and the implementation of the process by skilled educators to whom the system gives scheduled responsibilities.

From the traits above, one can assert that traditional African societies, as represented in Armah's selected novels, employ formal and organise educational structures to transmit essential knowledge for communal survival to younger generations. Education in these societies is neither random nor entirely informal; it follows structured systems designed to pass down cultural values, spiritual wisdom, and practical skills across generations. While these systems varied from one community to another, they shared a commitment to formalised instruction through rites of passage, apprenticeship, orature, and specialist guilds. Ayi Kwei Armah's selected novels engage deeply with these indigenous learning structures.

1. 2. The Role of Initiation in Education

Initiation is a well-known educational practice within traditional societies that is used to train youngsters in the ways of their people. Its main aim is to help children fully assume social responsibilities. As Armah writes in *Two Thousand Seasons*, initiation aims at the "preparation for womanhood or the preparation for manhood." (Armah 1973, p. 90) Initiation helps build capacity and entrust the young with essential human characteristics to face life. Babacar Diop, in "African Education: Mirror of Humanity," corroborates the contribution of initiations in inculcating social values in young children. He posits that:

> If African initiation allows for the affirmation of strong identities, of assumed personalities, if it encourages the practice of endurance, the achievement of exploits, it prepares for the handling of the law of opposites: remedy/poison, life/death, etc. Through rebirth dialectic space becomes larger, and cyclic practices are not in contradiction to a spiral evolution. (Diop 2000, p. 88).

To the author, initiation is a multi-purpose process among Africans. It is a medium for teaching basic life principles to young people in a community. The youth are introduced to what matters in the community. They are also shown what is reprehensible in the promotion of social renewal and evolution. Diop views African initiation as a transformative process that affirms identity, builds endurance, and prepares individuals to reconcile life's dualities. Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers* largely support this view, portraying initiation as a structured path to communal integration and self-discovery. However, Armah complicates Diop's ideal by exposing tensions around gender and agency – Anoa's rejection of traditional roles and Koranche's disengagement show that initiation requires personal conviction, not just participation.

Initiation is an opportunity that brings all the children of the community together to develop strong bonds. The narrator in *Two Thousand Seasons* asserts that it is "a beautiful time, time of friendship, time of learning, when in the blindness of childhood, we knew only of our growing powers but of the weakening, the destruction of the power of our people we were completely ignorant" (Armah 1973: 85). The narrator confirms the targeted communion the initiates are expected to develop using the plural "we." Because of the shared experience during the period, they should come out from the exercise with a clear-framed opinion of the importance of the group. When undergoing initiations, young people benefit from both an enforcement of fundamental societal values and cognitive knowledge.

The knowledge produced in such traditional institutions can be grouped into two categories: general skills and specialised skills. General knowledge is imparted based on the distribution of societal roles to every member of society in general. In *Two Thousand Seasons*, through Anoa's life story, the narrator recalls the circumstances of the latter's training episodes and quotes some of the essential criteria behind undertaking a particular initiation as follows:

> At the time of her training, when it was thought she too could be led into choosing mother chores, she foresaw the intended separation, spurned it and asked to be trained with her brothers in the hunt. Rejected, she lost all interest in sustaining life, refused food, would touch no water till she was admitted to the training of her age (Armah, 1973, p.14).

The quote stipulates that the initiates are further organised and grouped according to what society awaits from them. The organisation displays a role distribution that shows the precedence of societal stratification over the individual's personal needs, which may not meet the individual's expectations, as demonstrated by Anoa's potential strike before admission. As a woman, Anoa is expected to further her skills in the field society bestows on women. Unexpectedly, Anoa refuses the mother's chores and expresses her keen desire to undergo the same training with her brothers in fields dedicated to men only. Her attitude expresses the author's stance regarding role distribution in the represented society.

Moreover, training is designed for a particular "age group." Attendees are cohorts of the same age as the previous quote asserts. The narrator reinforces the age issue considered in conducting initiation in her explanation of the dance of love. The narrator indicates that the events occurred prior to the period when their generation began the initiation process. Similarly, in *Kmt: In the House of Life*, Armah addresses the issue of age through Lindela's conversation with Astw, where it is revealed that training in the art of eloquence follows a structured progression. Children undergo seven-year cycles, each culminating in an initiation ceremony. The first cycle focuses on foundational communication skills, while more advanced selection

and specialization begin in the second cycle. Astw posits that the traditional training she benefits from welcomes all the children of the same age, but that selection is based on the specific skills each child develops. The performers who display extraordinary talents advance toward expertise in their chosen field. In sum, they are instructed in specialised skills. These abilities justify the existence of clearly set mechanisms in traditional society for knowledge transmission implemented in places dedicated to this enterprise.

2. INFRASTRUCTURES IN PORTRAYED FORMAL – LIKE EDUCATION

In the selected novels, Armah represents nature-bound premises of initiations, the traditional African formal education, one that is set for imparting knowledge to younger generations. These settings host populations who dedicate themselves to the practising, protection, transmission, and improvement of a particular skill, art, craft or knowledge. Armah contrasts them with modern schooling infrastructures to show that despite these material differences, both systems occupy the identical social role: the regulated transformation of the youth into a recognized adult member of society.

2.1. The Repository of Tradition in *Kmt: in the House of Life*

Armah depicts a location of specific skill acquisition in *Kmt: in the House of Life*. Named "Yarw," it is a village founded by traditionalist historians. The deliberate function as a training locale hinges explicitly on Yarw's geographic and social isolation. The village's remoteness from the "better-known centers of influence" – Niani, Sikabon, and Niwt (Armah 2002, p. 125) – is not incidental but deeply pedagogical: Armah positions the physical dislocation of the child as the first prerequisite for authentic learning. Within this sealed environment, the infrastructure for training youth diverges sharply from the formal classroom; it encompasses the entire village footprint The traditionalists historians, among whom Djiely Hor and Astw Konaté, the portrayed couple are considered the repositories of their people's history and ancient ways. They transmit their knowledge to the initiates that are welcomed in their locale. Elaborating on the village, the narrator voices:

> I knew no one in Yarw. The little town had a murmured reputation as a place of some mystery. Among academicians it was called a home of singers, poets and historians—traditionalists who had lived there, away from the better-known centers of influence and power that were Sikabon, Niani and Niwt… (Armah 2002, p. 125)

The narrator emphasises the small size of the village because it welcomes a single and clear-cut community. The smallness of the village, emphasized by the narrator, further cements the

training function – it is a deliberately contained ecosystem where elders can monitor, guide, and embody tradition for the young, making the geography itself a co-teacher in the child's formative journey. Yarw contributes to the training and capacity building of young people who engage in majoring in the old ways of their communities. Astw confirms the training function of their village when she explains her training steps in a discussion with Lindela, who questions her:

> "Did you have to go to a special school? Or schools?"
> "Home was the first place of learning. Had I stayed home all the way, I'd have remained in Niani, and grown into a royal court traditionalist. But at fourteen I came to this town."
> "Of your own will, or were you sent here?"
> "Both. The training of traditionalists falls into seven-year cycles. By the end of my first seven years I knew I was drawn to this work of knowledge, sufficiently to make it my lifework. My teachers were generally pleased with my learning abilities, but near the end of the second cycle of seven years, questions arose among them, about me…At the end of the second cycle it was decided I'd never make a proper court traditionalist. I was sent to Yarw, because this is the home of our most ancient knowledge, and those whose work is to take care of that knowledge do not normally speak for the court at public ceremonies" (Armah, 2002, pp.153-154).

Astw explains to Lindela that her education began at home and followed a structured system of seven-year cycles. Although initially on track to become a court traditionalist, her teachers later redirected her to Yarw, a village known for preserving ancient knowledge, where traditionalists focus on safeguarding wisdom rather than performing public roles. One is sent to Yarw when a person manifests a firm conviction and is identified as such by their teachers.

The town focuses on training traditionalists who will safeguard and transmit the most profound layers of cultural heritage. Yarw thus functions as a repository of indigenous knowledge, emphasizing depth, continuity. The case of this training village is not unique in the selected works.

2.2. The Locale of the Healing Expertise in *The Healers*

In *The Healers*, Armah introduces the readers to the healing community that inhabits the Eastern Forest through the protagonist Densu's journey to visit the healer Damfo and to embrace the healing profession. The author reveals that Damfo and his colleagues live in the eastern forest, a location that matches with the direction from which the sun rises every morning. Going to this place represents a new dawn in life for Densu. Moreover, the forest is a vibrant space where green life flourishes, offering a rich ecosystem filled with plants, animals, and flowing streams of water – each essential to sustaining life. Its natural abundance symbolizes renewal, balance, and vitality. These life-giving features reflect the promise

embedded in Densu's new path, suggesting that his journey aligns with harmony, growth, and purpose. Hence, Armah depicts the eastern forest as the storehouse of fundamental healing values where Densu will be trained to help restore and protect his community and its people. This transformative journey extends beyond physical healing to the cultivation of inner discipline and moral consciousness, a process that reaches its fullest expression in the Forbidden Grove.

2.3. The Forbidden Grove: The Craftsmanship of the Soul

The grove is a highly important and secret place within the community Armah portrays in *Two Thousand Seasons*. The narrator presents it as "the forbidden grove, the grove of sources, intent not on destroying but on seeking." (Armah 1973, p. 89) This specific area during the stages of initiations, welcomes the youngsters who are elected to the last steps. To present the elected, the narrator describes a final, profound stage of initiation reserved for those not yet committed to a specific craft. These individuals are guided toward mastering the "craftsmanship of the soul," a sacred vocation once held by soulguides – keepers of ancestral wisdom and spiritual direction. This highlights the depth and selectivity of the initiation process at its highest level.

The participants in the "initiation beyond initiations." (Armah 1973, p. 88) are those who go to the grove because they are expected to, later on, perform as soul guides, for they will be endowed with special knowledge, "knowledge of a craftsmanship of the soul." Not everybody in the community is lucky enough to visit the grove. The author confirms the scarcity of the happy few during previous seasons through the reaction of Isanusi the fundi, meaning "master," who inhabits the grove. The narrator reports:

> Isanusi was not disturbed, though it was a great surprise to him that so many of us had come in this one season of initiation where in the past each generation had given barely one. He asked us if truly all of us had mastered the skills of the beginning fundi yet still desired to move on at every level." (Armah 1973, p. 89)

The initiation cohort of the narrator is an uncommon one. The high number of elected trainees makes Isanusi inquire whether they qualify for the present process and are still ready to continue climbing the experience ladder. The quote shows Isanusi's knowledge is anchored in tradition and long-term observation. By recalling that "in the past each generation had given barely one," he demonstrates a scholar's grasp of historical patterns. Erudition is shown through his use of precise, specialized terminology. He refers to the "skills of the beginning fundi" and the necessity to "move on at every level." This reveals that he possesses an exhaustive, internalized map of the entire pedagogical structure – from the most elementary stage of a *fundi* to the

highest rungs. Ola in "The Feminine Principle and the Search for Wholeness in *The Healers*," echoes the particularity of those people, stressing that: "The groups in Two Thousand Seasons and *The Healers* are very select groups to which one qualifies after a rigorous process of specialized education, self-conviction, and dedication." (Ola 1985, p. 75). The author notices that in *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*, the select groups are knowledge communities that serve as symbols of disciplined resistance and visionary leadership. Membership requires more than just participation – it demands deep internal transformation through specialised education, personal conviction, and unwavering dedication. They are groups that embody the ideals of collective purpose and selfless service, standing as counterforces to colonial disruption in African societies.

These communities develop specific living norms as a result of the select conditions to be met before one can be admitted to integrate the latter. Therefore, because of the strict ways of conducting their existence, common people most often consider them lunatics. Isanusi's community in *Two Thousand Seasons* presented him as a madman until the initiates who met him in the grove discovered he was not insane. Likewise, Ababio in *The Healers*, presents Damfo as a "mad healer" living in the eastern forest. The representation of these communities features their specific function and nature.

However, what do Africans specifically teach to the youth? In sum, what characterises traditional education? Seeking answers to these concerns, the study explores the content and features of the training in traditional educational systems.

3. KEY PARADIGMS IN THE CONTENT AND METHODS OF ENDOGENOUS EDUCATION

This section discusses the fundamental frameworks and principles governing traditional African education. Focusing on community-oriented education, and the role of instructors, it examines how education is intertwined with cultural values and social structures. This proves that education is shaped by and reflects the culture and social organization of a society. In other words, it shows that education is not just about learning academic subjects—it also transmits cultural values, reinforces or challenges gender roles, and reflects the responsibilities and expectations of the community.

3.1. Curriculum in Traditional African Education

Scholars have predominantly defined a curriculum as the subjects that are included in a course of study or taught in a school or a college. Meanwhile, in traditional Africa, the

curriculum is not abstract but comprises everyday survival and communal activities. It aims at transmitting practical skills, arts and crafts, and knowledge about the living environment. The selected novels show that people in traditional education also avail themselves of some teaching content to hand down to their children for the preservation and survival of social values and principles. Armah evidences it in *Two Thousand Seasons* when he lists explicit subjects such as protection, farming, hunting, fishing, rowing, building, carving, healing, weaving, working leather, turning metal, moulding clay, and the oratory art.

In the traditional societies represented in the selected works, the curriculum in formalised training aims to help the learner better fit into their environment. It introduces the participants to the secrets of the activities practised in the community for survival and self-sufficiency.
The curriculum favours skill discovery and performing social duty. It aims to help learners discover their abilities and find a vocational field. The distribution of these skills assigns citizens to specific duties, preventing wrongful claims to belonging and reinforcing social categories. In Two Thousand Seasons, the poor performance of Koranche, the king's son, in hunting and craft serves as direct evidence that excellence in these practical crafts is the non-negotiable benchmark of a proper education, regardless of status. The narrator addressing the poor performance of Koranche during the ongoing initiations, affirms: “He did not care to push himself to excellence in any craft, (…) in the art of hunting too there seemed to be nothing at all he could learn.” (Armah 1973, pp. 67-68) Thanks to this distribution, people give more credit to the different existing functions and keep to them. These functions correspond to social categories that people in traditional societies have experienced from generation to generation. Teaching aims at playing a functional role. Children go through different arts so that each may find the vocational field in which they would like to deepen their skills. The teaching helps learners discover their abilities and raise the interests of the youth in a particular craft.

Besides, the novelist addresses how teachers in traditional education transmit skills to the initiates. To him, the pedagogical methods involve riddles, proverbs, songs and dances. However, he points out that though the methods are the same, they differ in content according to the art or craft taught. The pedagogical methods used are of paramount importance in traditional societies and to traditional people in general. Mabana K. C. in *Oral Tradition, Myth and Education in African Francophone Literature,* echoes the importance of the methods Armah mentions. He highlights that:

> In proverbs there is a rich deposit of the wisdom of many generations. Every African society has its proverbs, and wise people know how to use them properly. The knower of proverbs is highly considered in the society because he incarnates the wisdom of the ancestors; he is a

> master of the word. Proverbs work as argumentative assertions and rhetorical means to support a case during the indigenous judiciary (Mabana, 2009, p.3).

Mabana K. C. justifies the use of proverbs as means for teaching and transmitting knowledge in African societies. Indeed, proverbs host wisdom and are communication tools any wise person strives to possess because societies value those who understand and know how to use them properly. In this sense, to conveniently use and understand proverbs requires a certain maturity and the ability to do so proves that one is thoroughly rooted in the ways of one's community. In *The Gods Are not to Blame*, Ola Rotimi, a Nigerian playwright stresses how important proverbs stand in Yoruba society. During a discussion between the king Odewale and Aderopo, a son to the former's wife, the playwright paints the Yoruba's view of proverbs functioning as an identity marker. When Aderopo asks the meaning of his speech, Odewale cuts in: "What is the matter, fellow, aren't you a Yoruba man? Must proverbs be explained to you after they are said?" (Rotimi 1971, p. 32) For Odewale, a true Yoruba man must be able to decipher the meaning implied in proverbs. The convenient use of proverbs is a metric of one's knowledge of the ways of the community life. As such, they are also fundamental in properly entrusting children with adequate knowledge of the social activities and enacting the values that the community dearly holds for many generations.

Definitely, the curriculum transmits knowledge and labour practices necessary for material and communal survival. It is framed as a cultural mechanism that prepares youth to become custodians of social organization, intertwining practical skills with the moral and cultural wisdom required for social cohesion and collective identity.

3.2. Community-Oriented Education

The sense of community is a dominant value and defining feature of traditional African life. It influences the daily behaviour of people. It plays a major role in building a peaceful atmosphere and in promoting harmonious communal life among the members of society. In traditional Africa, people experience life collectively. As such, everyone in society is aware of their belonging to a group and the importance of the community outweighs all other considerations.

Traditional education helps community members perceive the importance of the community and reinforces their desire to learn about its guiding principles. Hence, the content of any training reflects the ideals and priorities of society and the needs of the individual. The relationship between the individual and society is very important in traditional Africa. Society

serves as a foundation upon which the individual expresses and fulfils themselves. The group appears to be a life-giving force that protects people and preserves cohesion.

The instructional activities are therefore directed towards the social life of the community, so as to prepare the learners to understand their role and fit into their community. Armah echoes this interconnectedness, showing that the individual defines themselves through society in *Two Thousand Seasons*. When the king planned the arrest of the new initiates, he promises to organise the celebration of the end of initiation in an unusual way. He invites them aboard the boat of his white friend. Abena, one of the initiates, does not agree with the offer. Nonetheless, he dare not oppose the will of the other members of the group. The discussion between Abena and Sobo reveals the vision of society regarding the interrelationships between the individual and society. To the inference of Sobo, "you could have refused to come. You could have saved yourself," reacting to Sobo's assertion, Abena replies: "saved myself apart from all of us?' Abena asked. Silence. There is no self to save apart from all of us. What would I have done with my life, alone, like a beast of prey?" (Armah 1973, p. 111) Abena affirms that in traditional society, the individual is shaped with the community in mind, and traditional education is designed to pass down across generations this collective vision.

3.4. The Instructor in the African Education System

Endogenous education in Africa does not acknowledge a distinct category of professional and full-time teachers for the purpose of general education. The African worldview holds that knowledge is stored in the heads of elders and more experienced people, that is, the adult members of the community. Traditional society recognises and bestows the guidance and monitoring of younger members to outgrown community members because of their living experience. Armah addresses the issue when he shows Densu in quest of a more experienced person to help him understand things not clear to him:

> These had been questions disturbing his mind, but now he felt almost certain he could see answers, and this near-certainty brought him a deep, calm clarity. He wished he could talk to someone older and more experienced, someone who would understand his mind's desire, and perhaps point out paths he wished to follow in his mind but could not yet see in the real world. (Armah 1978, p. 26)

As the narrator suggests, old age represents a reservoir of accumulated experience and wisdom. This positions elders as custodians of cultural traditions. They are individuals entrusted with guiding younger generations and transmitting essential knowledge that sustains communal values and identity. Dama Mosweunyane supports the teachers' role the elders play in traditional environment. He claims, "The elders were teachers in the African settings such as in

the training of regiments for mastery of survival skills." (Mosweunyane 2013: 52). Like Armah, Mosweunyane recalls the position of elders and adults in general in traditional educational schemes. But in the formalised educational type, teachers are mainly skilled people in the art in which children have to be trained. The narrator in *Two Thousand Seasons* refers to teachers as "expert", "fundi" or "master" who are in charge of helping learners deepen their skill.

CONCLUSION

In examining the formal like education within traditional African societies and particularly through the selected works of Ayi Kwei Armah, it becomes evident that education transcends the simple transfer of knowledge. It is a structured process deeply embedded in the community's cultural and social fabric, aimed at preparing individuals for meaningful roles within society. The exploration of endogenous education in his narratives offers profound insight into the vital role education plays in sustaining communities through local knowledge, cultural heritage, and a sense of belonging. In *Two Thousand Seasons*, *The Healers*, and *Kmt: In the House of Life*, learning is portrayed as a holistic process through which the author advocates for the recovery and revitalisation of indigenous frameworks that place communal well-being, cultural continuity, and ethical responsibility at their core.

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