



Towards reconstructing Africa: Recuperation and responsibility in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Healers*

Augustine H. Asaah & Tao Zou

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A product of Africa's pre-colonial and colonial history, Ayi Kwei Armah's fifth novel, *The Healers* (1978), is steeped in an African communalistic worldview and the functional conception of art. In this article we examine the multiple dimensions to recuperation within the context of the reconstruction of Africa, the continental search for utopia, and the responsibility that this places on Africans. Using Armah's communitarian perspectives on health as a guide, we identify six interlocking subsets of recuperation as healing, re-creation, renaissance, repossession, recall, and *Sankofa* (return). Informed by Molefi Kete Asante's construct of agency and Armah's communalistic injunctions to readers, we establish that permeating each of these building blocks is the responsibility of Africans to operationalize the reconstruction of Africa, the leitmotif of the novel. As helpers, visionaries, and custodians of vital traditional knowledge and skills, the healers facilitate the sharing of information on Africa's past and future against the background of British colonial domination. We also show that Armah deliberately gives the novel this polysemic title to transcend the spatial, cultural, and epistemic limitations imposed on the continent by the colonial order. We conclude that the social orientation and creative configuration of health in the work are consistent with the diverse and intermingling meanings of recuperation. **Keywords:** Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Healers*, African recuperation, African responsibility, African reconstruction.

Introduction

Completed by Ayi Kwei Armah in 1975, *The Healers* was first published in 1978, almost a century after the 1873–1874 war between the British and Asante/Ashanti that culminated in the defeat of the latter and prepared the ground for their future incorporation into the Gold Coast colony, now Ghana. The success of the colonial campaign was not just a function of European technological superiority and cultural onslaught but of the divisiveness among African peoples. Equally worth noting is the novel's year of publication occurring some hundred years after the 1884 Berlin Conference which formalized the colonial dismemberment of Africa.

Given this historical and sociogenic context, Armah conceptualizes healing as an all-embracing therapeutic activity, guided by the imperative of wholeness—that is, the unification of fragmented entities: individuals, ethnic groups, and nations in Africa and the African diaspora. Grounded in communalism, Armah's dilated conceptualization of healing is thus premised on his project of dismantling the spatial, cultural, and epistemic limitations that colonialism imposed on Africans. Whereas the paratextual paramountcy accorded to healing foregrounds the primacy of therapy and wellness—reflecting the convergence of form and substance, and art and ideology in the narrative—the context invests the term with polyvalence. Six dynamic and interlocking variables of the hypernym “recuperation”—healing/recovery, reinvigoration/renaissance, re-creation, repossession, recall, and *Sankofa* (return)—are deployed by Armah to reinforce the imperative of Africa's reconstruction and resistance to hegemony.

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The Healers has received its fair share of critical appraisal, some disparaging (Lindfors), some balanced (Boafo; Ogede), and some eulogistic (Nwahunanya; Petrie; Ashcroft). If scholars are unanimous on the centrality of physical, psychological, and social healing to the novel, very few have interrogated the nature and scope of its underlying concept of responsibility-laden multi-faceted recuperation. Appositely, Bill Ashcroft says of Armah's fifth novel: "The healing that comes from the recuperation of traditional knowledge is a key feature of Armah's vision of the future, and the memory of history a key to the transformation of the present" (710). For all their incisiveness, Ashcroft's article, "Remembering the Future: Utopianism in African Literature", and Y. S. Boafo's "The Nature of Healing in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Healers*", for example, do not consistently explore the diverse facets of recuperation and Armah's call for commitment to give effect to each of its constituent variables.

To the extent that the name Damfo, the master healer, in the Mfantse dialect of Akan means "friend" or "helper", it foregrounds the facilitative role of the guild of visionary traditional health practitioners, thus indexing, by the same token, the responsibility of subjects (patients, polity, public) in their own multiple recuperation.¹ In other words, recuperation, for Armah, involves the responsiveness, agency, and self-empowerment of the individual and the community in their multidimensional wellbeing. The double focus, in the current study, on multivalent recuperation and the imperative of responsibility that attends on each of the constituent subsets of recuperation will help to fill the gap in knowledge with respect to the literature on therapy in *The Healers*.

Operationally defined in this paper as commitment, duty, action, praxis, application of knowledge, and self-empowerment, the notion of responsibility is grounded in this configuration by Molefe Kete Asante, the renowned Afrocentricity scholar: "An agent, in our terms, must mean a human being who is capable of acting independently in his or her own best interest. Agency itself is the ability to provide the psychological and cultural resources necessary for the advancement of human freedom" (153). The construct is also anchored in Armah's insistence on African renaissance (cultural, social, and political) as a function of the courage to deploy available knowledge and competencies for the creation of a better world (*Remembering the Dismembered Continent II*). Further, it resonates with Jing Yin's thesis on responsibility as a key component of ethics and the backbone of community building (79). Accordingly, this study will show how each of the six identified interrelated manifestations of recuperation—recovery, reinvigoration, re-creation, repossession, recall, and *Sankofa*—is invested with a call to duty and to action in the reconstruction of Africa.

These six constituent subtypes function as the pillars which prop up recuperation in *The Healers*. By extension, they also serve as the building blocks of the reconstruction of Africa. An analysis of their place in the narrative will proceed from the simple/obvious (that is recuperation as the restoration of personal and societal wellbeing) to the most complex/controversial (recuperation tied to the mythical *Sankofa* symbol).

Recuperation as restoration of individual health and collective strength

In effect, the healers demonstrate the first meaning of recuperation as cure and recovery at the bodily, mental, and societal levels. The healers' recourse to traditional pharmacology, psychiatry, naturopathy, and other ecologically friendly therapeutic resources of their locality to heal and cure patients in the fictive village of Esuano in a British-dominated colony testifies to the entrenchment and popularity of African Traditional Medicine (ATM) as opposed to Western biomedicine in the then Gold Coast. Strategically located all over the British-dominated territory, the healers restore corporal and psychological integrity to Densu (of Esuano), Araba Jesiwa (of Esuano), King Sakity (of Ada), and other patients across the colony. Their healing also attracts to their Twifo Praso healing center Asamoa Nkwanta, the devastated Asante war general, brought down from Kumasi, the capital of the yet-to-be-conquered Asante Kingdom.

Arguably, the ubiquitous visibility of ATM vis-à-vis the quasi-absence of Western therapeutic systems translates the novelist's counter-hegemonic intention. Not only does the efficacy of ATM serve to debunk the colonial depiction of Africa as "a hothouse of fever and affliction" (Comaroff 305–6), it deconstructs the prejudice of imperial agents (administrators, missionaries, merchants, ethnologists, historiographers, "discoverers", etc.), exemplified by David Livingston's disciple, James Stewart, for whom ATM was one of the deadliest and "most malignant of influences in Africa" (Lund 91)—see also Jackson; and Konadu ("Medicine"; *Indigenous Medicine and Knowledge in African Society*).

Despite the general accessibility of the traditional healing service to the community, it must be stressed that, as in most health professions, it is a calling for a few, without the healers being necessarily elitist. As Samuel Adu-Gyamfi and Eugenia Ama Anderson observe, "Herbal knowledge was usually the preserve of a kin group [...].

Expert traditional healing knowledge is always the preserve of a kin group and only a few people are exposed to such knowledge” (76–7). By reason of the healers’ self-discipline (misread by some commentators as asceticism) coupled with their idealism, certain critics have portrayed them as priggish to the extent of sardonically tagging them as “saintly characters” (Gikandi 323), “saintly illuminati” (Boafo 324), and “saintly breed” (Lindfors 373). Certainly, the healers are rigorous in their approach to health and the application of scientific knowledge. However, there is arguably no elitism in the healers’ demonstrated dedication to their call and in the general comportment of Damfo (of Esuano), Ama Nkroma (of Cape Coast) Nyaneba, Tweneboa, and Mensa (of Twifo Praso), Duodo (of Atike), and Ezua (from the West). Nor can sanctimoniousness and smugness be read into their recruitment of Densu, their confusion before the daunting nature of their task, and the consensual nature of their decision-making. The very fact of their spread in the British colony rather suggests openness, a horizontal relationship, and effective reciprocity-driven communal network, remarkable in 19th century Africa. Worthy of emulation then is their individual and collective dedication to the promotion of collective health, skillful application of science, and the African reunification/renaissance project, so dear to Armah. The commitment and perseverance of the healers are reminiscent of the legendary steadfastness of Kemetite scientists who could spend years waiting for the findings and fruits of their investigation of phenomena.

Facilitated by the close observation of nature, the healers’ skillful use of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) provides them with answers to the physiological and psychological ailments of subjects within their agrarian communities. Sodi *et al.* attribute the efficacy of ATM to time-honored therapeutic ethics and praxis on the African continent:

The traditional healers are guided by three principles. Firstly, the healer ensures that the patients are satisfied that they and their symptoms are taken seriously. The patient is given adequate time to talk about their fears. Secondly, the healer studies the patient in a holistic manner. Finally, the healer considers the patient [to be] an integral component of a family and a community rather than an isolated individual. (103)

Thus configured, Damfo’s art and science of healing fit into a long practice of ATM and socially conceptualized health. Armah notes, “Everything going on in the world today tells us that there is life in unity, death in division and disunity” (*The Eloquence of the Scribes: A Memoir on the Sources and Resources of African Literature* 234). Given Armah’s preoccupation in his non-fiction works with the health, survival, and prosperity of Africa amid endless internecine conflicts and exogenous threats, it comes as no surprise that personal and societal wellbeing, in his narratives, should transcend the biological. In his 2007 book *Indigenous Medicine and Knowledge in African Society*, richly interspersed with epigraphic excerpts from *The Healers*, Kwasi Konadu argues that, in the African context, disease or illness is a factor linked to the overriding concerns of health and healing since both occur at multiple levels and in diverse domains of life that may have nothing to do with physiologically determined notions of disease (17).

Commenting on the specific healing of the physically, mentally, and socially fractured Araba Jesiwa consequent upon the horrendous slaughter of her only son before her very eyes at Esuano, Boafo (329) contends, “Damfo’s treatment of Araba Jesiwa’s almost irreparable broken bones is a masterpiece of traditional healing. It is a medical molding of fragments into a single whole”. Boafo’s laudatory remarks about this first layer of recuperation by the healers are echoed by critics such as Ode Ogede, Chinyere Nwahunanya, Peter Petrie, and Khondlo Mtshali who stress the communitarian dimension to individual healing. For, embedded in the restoration of health to the individual is the notion of societal healing. In the view of Damfo and other like-minded practitioners of ATM, since unity/wholeness is health, strength, and vitality, and disunity/fragmentation is ill-health, weakness, and a source of vulnerability, healing is simply not a personal affair but a community issue. Individual physical recovery is projected as a conduit for communitarian equilibrium. The wellness or sickness of the individual has implications for the cohesion and survival of the entire social group. Significantly, Armah often resorts to the Kemetite myth of Osiris-Isis as archetype for characterization in his narratives. For example, the resuscitation of Jesiwa by Damfo can be re-presented as a creative and scientific version of the healing and resurrection of dismembered Osiris by Isis. While Isis uses her romantic love and magic power as therapy, Damfo deploys his communal love and ATM.

Given the exigency of wholeness, the healers challenge their public to the opening of the mind to a future that goes beyond single lifetimes, or even the lifetimes of single ethnic groups and nations (*Healers* 185). Such a conception of health places enormous responsibility on both individuals and the collectivity to ensure reciprocity, belongingness, and egalitarianism, since what affects a constituent part inevitably affects the whole. For Yin, while the Western conception of the part/whole relationship is based on subordination, with the whole being sustained by subordinating all constituent parts, in non-Western cultures the unity of the whole is achieved through the coordination and alignment of all integral parts with its own internal equilibrium (81).

Recuperation as rebirth, self-rejuvenation, and collective renaissance

As the foundational building block and the pivot of recuperation, the restoration of individual and collective integrity renders possible the second layer of recuperation discernible in reinvigoration, renaissance, and reconditioning. The healers do not only cure Densu, Araba Jesiwa, King Sakity, and Asamoah Nkwanta, the hitherto broken Asante war general, they also infuse the healed patients with new energy and new mental alertness. Their resuscitation/recovery results in a new lease of life, in rebirth.

With a new spring in his step, Densu confidently infiltrates enemy lines and devises anti-colonial military strategies with Asamoah Nkwanta. In a like manner, Araba Jesiwa, after her rejuvenation, participates vigorously in the outreach programs of the healers. By the same token, the recuperation gives the healed patients a new sense of direction, and a new community-centered awareness of lofty ideals, which approximate the egalitarian ethos of the healers and Kemet. Asamoah Nkwanta now shuns human sacrifice, Densu publicly declines the offer of royal title, and Araba Jesiwa rejects the spilling of the blood of a sacrificial lamb. Seen in this context, their recuperation becomes re-orientation towards societal responsibility. Their responsiveness gives further expression to Yin's observation: "to define our selfhood in terms of our relations with others does not emasculate our individuality or sense of agency. It is precisely through social relations that persons become cultural subjects and gain a sense of agency" (83). Leveraging holistic communalistic intellectual/social perspectives such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Afrocentricism, Yin further argues:

The duty consciousness in these [thoughts] emphasises the reciprocity between the self and the community. On the one hand, a person's self-realisation, to fulfil one's obligations to the community, is encouraged and nurtured by the community. On the other hand, self-realisation is to make the self available to contribute to the social order that enables the fulfilment of each individual's responsibilities. Thus, a person's moral development is both a duty of the self to the community and a duty of the community to the self. (83)

Remarkably, the healed characters in *The Healers* demonstrate this moral development and consciousness of the duty of the subject to the society and the duty of the society to the subject. The examples of Araba Jesiwa, Densu, and Asamoah Nkwanta serve as a challenge and a call to communitarian duty. In this sense, recuperation becomes renaissance, reinvigoration, and reconditioning, all robustly guided by palpable commitment to the common good. As earlier noted, Yin correctly stresses that responsibility is the motive power of ethics and the cornerstone of community building (79).

Rejecting Afro-pessimism, such responsibility-driven redirection is akin to Kā Mana's prescription of creative "psychic reform", "de-alienation", and reconditioning for Africans:

A call for liberation and for the transformation of the structures of our allegiance to the West is not enough. We must undertake a process of reconditioning of our inner life: conscience, heart, imagination and spirit. Such a process is not possible just by the power of denunciation and uprising, but by undergoing complex metabolisms whereby our sensibility, which is above all a work of reflexive lucidity, gives us the world as a sensible and significant world, not a world that is barren, morbid and frozen in its creative possibilities. (qtd in Ashcroft 705)

Thus, recuperation involves re-orientation towards society and active participation in one's wellbeing as it implicates subjects in their own rejuvenation and that of the community.

Araba Jesiwa and the other patients have all participated actively in their healing. Their resuscitation/recovery results in rejuvenation and reconditioning. The challenge that Armah leaves readers, the subaltern, and the black community is how far they can employ agency and cooperate with healers in their own healing and subsequent rebirth. In the recuperation of the broken Asante general, Damfo affirms that the therapy offered by the healer is only an enabler, an adjuvant, and that the real healing lies with the patient: "He (Damfo) would be impotent to help unless he, Asamoah Nkwanta, was himself ready to search for the way to recovery [...] [M]edicine could do

nothing if a human being was making war on his own natural self" (*Healers* 200). Accordingly, Boafo notes, "The success of healing depends on the response of the patient. It is a function of one's readiness to help oneself, that is, to react generously to the help that the healer offers. In short, it is a choice that one is prepared to be healed" (331).

The capacity of the patient to trigger his/her self-recovery mechanism and to positively respond to the healer's intervention is coextensive with the Bantu-Bakongo notion of "self-healing power" which is "the biogenetic package of power that is received at the moment of conception in the mother's womb" (Fu-Kiau qtd in Konadu, "Medicine and Anthropology in Twentieth Century Africa: Akan Medicine and Encounters with (Medical) Anthropology" 56). Still leaning on K. Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau, Konadu explains:

This package is not only the key to one's health, but it is the excellent healer since it is both creative and generative. For the Bantu-Bakongo, sickness is the abnormal functioning capacity of one's self-healing power caused not by bacteria or virus, but by the loss of the body's balance or energy. The cure is perceived in terms of wholeness and the therapist [*n'niakisi* or *m'fièdi*] "believes that therapy is essentially grounded in both flesh and spirit," a process of restoring self-healing power. ("Medicine" 56)

The idea of the body losing its balance or energy and thus becoming vulnerable to disease/external aggression evokes Damfo's warning on the body waging war upon its own natural self and, as a result, getting predisposed to malaise/exogenous onslaught. At the macro level, it can be deduced from both conceits that it behooves the community to constantly reactivate its intrinsic self-healing potential to ensure qualitative collective renaissance. As the Twi/Akan say, "*Aduoyefoɔnnom aduro mma ɔyarefoɔ*" (The one who makes the medicine does not drink it for the sick person) (Konadu, *Indigenous Medicine*, 196).² The patient, the community, and Africa all have a responsibility to cure themselves; the healer is just a helper.

Recuperation as re-creation of Africa and the future

Inevitably, personal and communal re-orientation entails the re-presentation of Africa to counter Eurocentric/colonial profiling of Africa. The recuperation of and by traditional knowledge facilitates the re-creation of Africa's history in a radical gesture to positively influence the course of Africa's destiny. Literary creation, medical creation, and epistemic creation constellate to produce another version of African history that inspires and animates agency as well as liberates the subaltern from long-held historiographical misrepresentation. As Edward Said asserts, "Resistance, far from being merely a reaction to imperialism, is an alternative way of conceiving human history" (260). Similarly, Ashcroft avers:

The healing that comes from the recuperation of traditional knowledge is a key feature of Armah's vision of the future, and the memory of history a key to the transformation of the present. Hegel's exclusion of Africa from History implied that Africans had no future. Therefore the retrieval of history was intimately connected with the 'retrieval' of a future—hence the utopian dimension of memory in *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*. (710)

For Armah, Hegel's thesis that Africans could only enter history and the future through the so-called benevolence and civilizing mission of European conquerors exemplifies Western attempts at the racial obliteration, epistemic erasure, and "cultural dehumanization" of Africans (*Remembering* 40–1). Convinced that "without a coherent sense of utopianism, liberation is impossible", Ashcroft posits the utopianism-inspired novels of Armah as works that transform the "rhetoric of resistance into a positive anticipation of future freedom" (703).

In their capacity as visionaries as well as custodians and transmitters of life-saving ancestral knowledge on African unity, the healers renew interest in *Ebibirman*, the lost unified Black community of ancient times. Like Kemet, *Ebibirman* in Mfantse/Akan means "the community of all black people" (99). The revival of interest in the legendary nation built on knowledge, unity, and symmetrical social relations is coaxial with raising the consciousness of readers towards the realization of the African utopia of unification. To a large extent, the triumph of the colonial army in the 1873–1874 Third Anglo-Asante War and the subsequent consolidation of British rule in the Gold Coast/Ghana were facilitated by intra-African rivalry. The Fante, Akim, Assin, Twifo, Denkyira (all allies of the British) and the Asante belong to the Akan cultural/linguistic community. West Indians and Africans (Ga-Adamgbe, Hausa, Opobo, Effutu, Kru, Mande, Temne, etc.) who are not Akan also aided the British to crush the Asante. This was a common pattern of imperial conquest and subsequent colonial divide-and-rule strategy in Africa and elsewhere. In this regard, Damfo's insistence on African unity and social healing acquires additional

relevance, transforming the call into a need: the reconstruction of a unified Africa as a duty that Africans owe to themselves and to posterity.

Recuperation as restoration and repossession

Subsumed in the re-invention of Africa and the re-creation of the future are the restoration of lost dignity, revalorization of traditional heritage, and the repossession of Kemetic unity. Having instilled confidence in the vanquished by orienting the public towards *Ebibirman*, Armah now leaves it to them to work towards repossessioning Kemet, making the ancient Egyptian success story of unity their own. Inevitably, the desire for this repossession is inseparable from individual and collective commitment. Should Africans fail this test, this identification with fame, they will remain in their current toxic space, infamously known for its systemic debilitation and prolific breeding of conflicts, famine, wars, and all sorts of instability (*Remembering* 13). According to Asante, “African people must be seen as agents in economic, cultural, political, and social terms [...]. When agency does not exist, we have the condition of marginality and the worst form of marginality is to be marginal within your own story” (153). This is comparable in to the infamous (self-) alienation of Africans from the glorious unity story of *Ebibirman/Kemet* in *The Healers*. Responsible identification with this unity story means Africans owning their past once again and securing/repossessioning their future.

Damfo laments, “The disease—the breaking up of that community [*Ebibirman/Kemet*—has taken centuries and centuries, thousands of years. Most of our people do not even wish to imagine any such possibility of wholeness” (99). Armah affirms that the revitalization of Per Ankh, the house of life, and the repossession of lost glory demand of Africans to breathe new vitality into their best values (*Eloquence* 306).

Appositely, a Sudanese proverb says, “We desire to bequeath two things to our children, the first being roots and the second being wings”. Paraphrasing this proverb, one can contend that the healers bequeath to Africans two legacies: roots in the shape of knowledge and history and wings in the form of opportunities and prospects, with the two legacies symbiotically facilitating autonomy, growth, and prosperity. Accordingly, for their healthy development, it is up to the audience of the healers to apply their new vital insights, acquired from the healers, to repossess *Ebibirman/Kemet*. This approximates Asante’s conceptualization of Afrocentricity as “conscientization related to the agency of African people” (153) in the actualization of the African reconstruction project.

Recuperation as recall and re-awakening

Intimately linked to the re-creation of the African past and future is the fifth building block of recuperation identifiable in recall. The healers’ re-awakening of Black people who have slept for so long involves recall and remembrance. Damfo’s strategic recourse to memory and his challenge to patients to recall the past serve as invaluable tools for therapy. In healing the physical and psychological scars of Araba Jesiwa, Densu, and Asamoia Nkwanta, Damfo challenges them to dig into the deepest recesses of their soul/self and leverage their self-knowledge. Fundamental to this process is the therapeutic recourse to subterranean memory, and therefore to the arcane past. The re-ignition of the desire to live and thrive for the individual finds its parallel, at the societal level, in the re-awakening of the collective survival and prosperity instinct. In other words, for both the subject and the community, re-awakened memory is crucial to health, to survival, and to triumph. The healing of the fractured and traumatized Araba Jesiwa symbolically demonstrates that the healers have the capacity to heal dismembered and distraught Africa for future generations. In each case, responsiveness to stimuli becomes the major catalyst of recuperation.

The recall of the past leads to the call of the future. As Damfo asserts, “If the pains bringing disease to the mind come from the past, healing means the mind must go beyond the past, traveling into the future as lightly as it can” (199). An integral component of AIKS, cultural memory merges with cultural history into a path towards future memory and future history, a fusion of both individual and collective trajectories. The supreme importance of the symbiotic relationship between the past and the future is also captured in the excerpt from “The Papyrus of Ani” which serves as the epigraph of Armah’s essay in *Remembering the Dismembered Continent*, dedicated to African reunification: “I am yesterday; I know tomorrow” (9).

In the words of Ashcroft, “the kind of recuperative return we find in the novels of Armah”, such as *The Healers*, is congruent with “a vision of the future grounded in a resurgent memory of the past” (704). Instructively, Ashcroft adds, “While it runs the risk of nostalgia, memory is often the only recuperative strategy available to

the oppressed, the marginalized, the downtrodden. It is also strategically placed to contest the ultimate imperial utopia—history itself” (708).

In consequence, AIKS, via memory, constitute and offer a path-clearing and path-finding ethos towards utopia. Armah contends that the work required to awaken African society from the slumber of divisions to the vitality of united thinking and action is fundamentally a task of memory (*Remembering* 36). In this respect, the healers represent the small group of well-informed pathfinders and path clearers committed to the search for real data, however long suppressed or deeply buried, for the benefit of an awakening audience (*Remembering* 12).

Damfo, the head therapist, conceives of the healers not just as helpers but also as awakeners of their people: “Sleep is natural [...] even it comes after unnatural disasters. But waking is even more natural. Healers are just awakeners of a people who have slept too long” (*Healers* 99). The responsibility of such awakened subjects is captured in Armah’s affirmation that memory is at once performance, re-enactment, reconnection, and a path:

A society whose members, after prolonged oblivion, become aware of their history all the way back to its beginnings is on the way to a great intellectual awakening. Awareness, however, is useless unless it turns active. The actual interaction of a society’s present with its past, oriented to its future, is the key to the embrace of history as resource, and understanding of memory as the venue of inspiration. (*Eloquence* 264)

Constitutive of the recuperative gesture of recall in *The Healers* are vital implications for bonding, empowerment, and agency, as it redirects healed and awakened subjects, individually and collectively, towards Africa’s reconstruction. Further, such reconnection, after the crucible of awakening, should translate into identification with Kemet’s acclaimed medical ethos and praxis, life-sustaining knowledge, life-enhancing biotic culture, and egalitarianism.

Recuperation as *Sankofa* (return/retrieval) with caution

In Akan, *Sankofa* literally means “return” or “go back for it”. In traditional African art and intellectual thought, such recuperation is symbolized by the *Sankofa* bird in motion towards the unknown, with its head inclined backwards, holding a precious object in its beak, a resource retrieved from the past for the benefit of the future. In the manner of Osiris and Ra, it can lay claim to being yesterday and tomorrow. As the allegorical dynamic confluence of the dead, the living, and the unborn, the sacred *Sankofa* bird makes it possible to configure recuperation—in the form of return to the past and reclamation of lost possession—as beneficial to the living and the unborn but, at the same time, as problematic, being fraught with danger and risks. Contrariety, tension, and conflict are inherent in its locomotion. Put differently, the recuperative back-and-forth journey of the *Sankofa* bird between the netherworld/the past and the unknown is at once salutary, necessary, and perilous. These preliminary perspectives on the *Sankofa* symbol and movement provide a nuanced context for the appreciation of recuperation in *The Healers* as return and re-appropriation, the culmination of the earlier layers of recuperation in the narrative.

Armah consistently decries the collective amnesia of Black people which has occasioned the loss of communitarian practices of wholeness, oneness, and belonging in *The Healers* and his other works. In the peritext of *Remembering the Dismembered Continent*, he says this of the cover illustration: “Cover motif: *Sankofa* bird in flight. The *Sankofa* bird, the ibis of Kemetic hieroglyphs and Akan *adinkra* graphics, is an ancient Osirian African symbol of memory. Its fragmentation, in this rendering, reflects the current dismemberment of African space and memory, key condition of our continuing subjugation”. Armah attributes the very mutilation of the legendary *Sankofa* bird, avatar of the revered Osirian Kemetic ibis, to the disintegration of the African continent by waves of invaders. Nonetheless, the fragmented bird, as the incarnation of memory, can be deployed to recuperate invaluable resources from the past for the reconstruction of Africa. In a similar vein, Camilia Kong asserts: “The Adinkra symbol of *sankofa* is [...] visually depicted as a mythical bird flying forward while looking back [and it] communicates the philosophy of retrieving lost or forgotten gems from the past as one moves forward; it involves reclaiming parts of African practice, history, and standpoints that have been hidden or distorted” (89). Similarly, for both Alfred Quarcoo and Philip Owusu, the mythical *Sankofa* bird represents the need to always retrieve the gems, wisdom, and positive values from the past in order to create a collective auspicious future. Undoubtedly, Armah sets much store by this nativist injunction which was particularly popularized after Ghana’s independence. Since the 1960s, the *Sankofa* myth has flourished in intellectual, artistic, and socio-political circles, among both Black and non-Black people the world over, particularly in Africa, the United States, Great Britain, and the Caribbean. It has also culminated in the creation of a movement called *Sankofaism*.

Towards the construction of the new Africa, the treasures and qualities which Armah wants Black people to recuperate from the past, especially pre-pharaonic Kemet, include its scientific traditions, value of unity, ATM, egalitarianism, and self-empowerment (“Masks and Marx: The Marxist Ethos vis-à-vis African Revolutionary Theory and Praxis”; *Eloquence; Remembering*). Others are the rational use of natural resources and the unwavering respect of the intergenerational duty towards the unborn (*Eloquence; Remembering; The Resolutionaries*). In like manner, it would be no exaggeration to state that the *Sankofa* trope and the imperative of African reunification overarch *The Healers*. *Sankofa*, then, is a major building block in African reconstruction.

Following Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral, Armah conceives of re-Africanization as a return to the source. His idealism and “strategic nativism” notwithstanding, he views *Sankofaism* and re-Africanization as a process which of necessity entails revitalization, winnowing, and cleansing (“Masks” 63–5). He reiterates that, in the search for solutions to their current disarray, Africans stand to gain by dispassionately assessing their continental traditions, filtering out the dross, and only keeping the valuable parts of their heritage (*Eloquence* 306), for present and future regeneration. After conceptualizing “naïve *sankofaism*” as the presumption that “African values and ways of life are normatively valuable in a wholesale sense and are capable of being revived in a pristine, authentic, and pre-colonial form” (89–90), Kong makes a case for “critical *sankofa*”. She defines this as “the process of reclaiming cultural values through the critical evaluation which leads to the reflective endorsement or rejection of past practices or traditions” (90). Such an approach is congruent with Armah’s thesis.

As seer, Damfo is, in many respects, Armah’s spokesperson in *The Healers*. Through this *Iso Lomso* (isiXhosa expression for The Eye of the Future), the novelist cautions Black people against the indiscriminate return to the past since that will translate into the wholesale endorsement of mutilative African cultural practices integral to slavery and castration, sullied royalty, human sacrifice, manipulation, and self-incapacitation. In brief, although Armah in *The Healers* repeatedly stresses the cardinal importance of the recuperation of the African past, he does not endorse the complete return to this past. There is no denying that Armah’s works, narratives and non-fiction alike, share many tropes with Negritude, such as nativism, obsession with culture, essentialism, pastoralism, communalism, tellurism (celebration of Mother Earth), and Pan-Africanism. This notwithstanding, his truculent and relentless condemnation of African aristocracy (associated as it is with slavery, class/caste systems, human sacrifice, castration, endless warfare, etc.) in favor of horizontal socio-political organizations (communalism, heterarchy, non-hierarchical structures, egalitarian order, symmetrical formations, non-vertical establishments) set him apart from the dual romanticization of the African past and royalty by the intellectual guides of Negritude, such as Léopold Sédar Senghor (see especially Armah, *Two Thousand*; “Masks”; *Eloquence; Remembering*). Soon after the 1968 publication of Yambo Ouologuem’s iconoclastic narrative, *Le devoir de violence* (*Bound to Violence*), in which the novelist satirically castigates the complicity of African kings in the slave trade and barbarity, as later Armah would also do with *Two Thousand Seasons*, Senghor condemns the young Malian writer for desecrating Africa’s hallowed history and culture (108).³In effect, Armah, like Ouologuem, recognizes that Africans are also responsible for some reprehensible crimes, especially those of pre-colonial times, like the production and reification of slaves/eunuchs, visible in *The Healers*, before and after the advent of colonialism.

As already observed, the physical, psychological, and communitarian integrity of all subjects in the collectivity subtends the very idea of health and in *The Healers*, and therefore, is antithetical, in Armah’s worldview, to all forms of subjugation, anathematization, and social exclusion. In many respects then, *The Healers* reflects Armah’s well-articulated preference in earlier and later writings (*Two Thousand Seasons*; “Masks”; *Osiris Rising: A Novel of Africa Past, Present and Future*; *KMT: In the House of Life*; *Eloquence; Remembering; The Resolutionaries*) for horizontal socio-political arrangements, sustained by reciprocity, harmony, empathy, and oneness. Pertinent to the discussion of the conjoined subject of Armah’s social configuration of health, predilection for horizontal socio-political organizations, and ferocious denunciation of African pre-colonial and post-colonial aristocracy is his remark:

Those who believe traditional African society was classless will find no comfort here. The society thus structured, with unproductive overconsumers (aristocrats) at its top, and productive underconsumers (slaves) at its bottom, had gaping faults. When the Europeans arrived, their overriding desire was for slaves. These they obtained by establishing a partnership with selected aristocrats willing to export Africa’s productive population and other resources in exchange for personal advantages and consumer goods, soon to be considered essential commodities. Thus Africa’s resources were hooked to the service of the Western economy. (*Remembering* 207–8)

With reference to the Waalo community (of Senegal), which serves as a microcosm of pre-colonial and post-independence Africa, Armah further notes:

The sober evidence of a permanent feature of African ruling class [is manifest in] an inability to think of prosperity in supra-personal terms. Here too is wry proof that the debtor lifestyle, now given such a high profile as a national way of life [in contemporary Africa], is centuries old. Waalo princes had a habit of borrowing from European traders, promising to pay in slaves. They then raided neighbors for captives, provoking reprisals and thus aggravating a climate of permanent insecurity in which development was impossible, and even basic survival was a lottery. (*Remembering* 208)

In the face of these sobering tableaux, the qualified desire of a return to the past means that *Sankofaism* and nativism must always be guided by caution and rational examination, even more so as awakening—an important feature of *The Healers*—connotes consciousness and vigilance, sanity and lucidity. As Damfo, in the true spirit of enlightened *Sankofaism*, argues, “Minds don’t stay in the past [...] They can find the truths of the past, come back to the present, and look toward the future” (204). Seen in this light, circumspection is vitally required of healed subjects/communities to jealously guard their newfound health, wellbeing, and bodily/psychological/social integrity. Individuals and communities owe it to themselves to subject the recuperation of the past to good judgment. In short, recuperation in the form of *Sankofa* is an obligation, an imperative, and an expectation, which must be met with caution. Still with regard to the tension between the past and the future, notwithstanding the novel’s general tenor of Manicheism (inspirers vs. manipulators, wholeness vs. fragmentation, pacifism vs. belligerence, good vs. bad guys, nationalists vs. colonial acolytes, etc.) and anti-colonialism, the anonymous narrator of *The Healers*, perhaps in spite of him/herself, projects the triumph of the dispensers of ATM in the arrest of King Ababio for the murder of Prince Appia as a function of the colonial rule of law. Together with the positive portrayal of certain British colonialists (the trader Collins and Governor McCarthy), this reality check appears to buttress the need for nativism to henceforth reckon with the new colonial dawn/order.

Conclusion

In *The Healers*, Armah thematizes the concept of multi-faceted wellbeing in the context of African reunification. The titular conspicuousness of the healers, practitioners of African ATM and, by extension, AIKS, places their practice, knowledge, and skills not just at the heart of physiological and psychological wellness but, even more importantly, at the center of African epistemic reclamation and the communitarian wholeness project that involves multilayered recuperation and (self)empowerment. The appraisal of responsibility and African reconstruction in the narrative is organically linked with the six operationally identified hyponymic pillars of recuperation—healing, renaissance, re-creation, repossession, recall, return/retrieval with caution—all of which coalesce to give Armah’s fifth novel its artistic and ideological charge. While none can contest the crucial multifarious roles of the healers in the realization of the African dream of unity, Armah suggests that the ultimate responsibility of translating the knowledge of the healers into reality rests with the bigger public of Africans. Applying the Sudanese proverb cited earlier to the landscape of *The Healers*, one can argue that the two vital assets bequeathed to Africans by the healers are roots and wings, incarnated respectively by knowledge/history/grounding/education and opportunities/responsibilities/flight/prospects/future.

Additionally, since unity is health and life, the multiple building blocks of recuperation demand of Africans individual and collective commitment to the renaissance of Africa. Through Damfo, his mouthpiece, Armah also proposes to Africans that their legitimate reclamation of *Ebibirman/Kemet* should be predicated on lucidity and vigilance, but not on unhealthy choices. Clearly, the social orientation and artistic configuration of health in the work is consistent with the diverse and intermingling meanings and subtypes of recuperation. This said, future research into a detailed comparison between *The Healers* and a Negritude work will undoubtedly shed more light on Armah’s preoccupation with African unity. So too will an eco-poetic unpacking of the narrative.

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Notes

1. Mfantse is one of the principal dialectal variants of Akan, a West African language spoken mainly in Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Mfantse is often spoken by the Fantse/Fante/Fanti. Much of the action in *The Healers* occurs on land that is traditionally occupied by the Fantse/Fante/Fanti.
2. Konadu stresses that the proverb is presented in Asante Twi, a major dialect of the Akan.

3. As if by coincidence, in 1968, much against the prevailing Negritude temper but in keeping with the nascent spirit of disenchantment, African chiefs, neocolonial oligarchy, and the African past were irreverently depicted in three West African novels: *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born* by Armah, *Le Devoir de violence* by Ouologuem, and *Les soleils des indépendances* (*The Suns of Independence*) by Ahmadou Kourouma.

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