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God and Earth in Elechi Amadi's Science Fiction

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Abstract: Elechi Amadi's reputation, as one of Africa's significant writers of Nigerian extraction, has been firmly established by his novels. *The Concubine*, *The Great Ponds*, *The Slave*, and *Estrangement* are well known. In about five decades of his artistic career, till his death in 2016, Amadi maintained an image of excellence. His fiction, non-fiction, plays, and poems indicate that he has produced works that have abiding resonance. In 2011, he published *When God Came*, his last and perhaps least known work. It is science fiction, comprising two parts. This essay examines the depiction of God, the earth, and speculative science in Amadi's last work.

Keywords: Africa; Nigeria; Elechi Amadi; Science Fiction

Introduction

Eustace Palmer says that Amadi belongs to "the first rank of African novelists" (46). He adds that, compared to Amadi, "it is difficult to conceive of a more accomplished craftsman of a novelist who demonstrates greater skill in putting various elements of the novel so scrupulously and meticulously together" (46). Ebele Ewa Eko and Femi Osofisan agree with Palmer that Amadi's texts are of great quality. Eko states that Amadi's works "maintain a consistent high quality of style and craftsmanship" (17), and Osofisan calls Amadi "a superb spinner of words" (33).

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Amadi has brought his characteristic artistry to *When God Came*, his only work of science fiction. It is a fulfilment of his interest in that sub-genre. In 2008, he published an essay, "Science Fiction and Mainstream Literature," in a book edited in his honour by Seiyifa Koroye. The said essay defines science fiction as "a literary genre" that is "usually based on imaginary and technological advances," or on "imaginary and severe changes in the human condition and environment" (20). "Imaginary" is a keyword because, as Joseph Patrouch says, "science fiction represents one of man's most imaginative and enjoyable efforts" (xv). It does not seek to ultimately present the truth of facts or history but imagination.

In the said essay, Amadi demonstrates his knowledge of the sub-genre by presenting a reading list that includes H. G. Wells, Jules Verne, Isaac Asimov, etc. In the list, he announces that his own works, "When God Came" and "Song of the Vanquished," will be published. Both stories have come to make up *When God Came*, a single volume. Given that Amadi places a short version of his aforementioned essay as a foreword to *When God Came*, the essay becomes doubly important because it calls attention to itself. The author uses it once again to restate his opinion about science fiction. He says:

What is the Science Fiction scene in Nigeria like? I have not read any modern SF written by a Nigerian or indeed any African author. I suspect that if modern SF exists in Nigeria, it is certainly very scarce. The reason is not far to seek. Firstly, Nigeria is not science-oriented. This means that readers who enjoy [SF] in Nigeria are few; but worse, [SF] writers will be even fewer or non-existent. (iii, interpolation mine)

Aspects of Amadi's observation can be debatable. But his opinion has motivated him to contribute to the sub-genre. Though he is an established writer of fiction, readers will engage this text on its own merit. This paper examines the content and context of Amadi's book to uncover its depiction of God, the earth, and speculative science. Science fiction implies that "science does not give us the truth. It gives us our best estimates and guesses about the truth" (Patrouch xv).

God and Earth: Speculation or Reality?

The two stories in Amadi's book are ages apart. "When God Came," the title-story, is set in contemporary time, "Song of the Vanquished" is aeons ahead of the present. There is an unequal reflection on God in both stories. Amadi's writings have always been interested in the role of the supernatural and/or divinity in human affairs. In *Speaking and Singing*, Amadi makes a telling statement about God and the cosmos.

He says: if we want to believe that matter, that is, the universe or cosmos, has always existed and was not created, we must also accept, in considering biological life, that this cosmos is also supremely intelligent. So, what seems unavoidable is the necessity for a Supreme Intelligence. Whether we call it God or the Cosmos makes no difference. Indeed, many religious groups believe that God is in all things: in other words, God is the Cosmos. (85)

Is that the God that Amadi depicts in "When God Came"? It is perhaps safer to say upfront, as Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle have declared, that "we have absolutely no authority whatsoever to proclaim anything at all" about God (161). Except that when God or divinity textually enters the realm of literature, it requires that we leave no stone unturned.

Amadi's "When God Came" is set a few years after the year 2000. The exact year is unspecified but New York is the story's locale. The city has its familiar status as the headquarters of the United Nations (UN). By rooting this narrative in a familiar context that has global significance, the narrator seeks to situate the story's strangeness in loam. In its opening, the story places the media essence of New York in the hands of the city's esteemed resident and global administrator, the Secretary-General of the UN, whose daily routine is about to be disrupted.

The Secretary-General dozes off after reading an unnamed magazine that evokes the world's fixation on apocalypse and/or eschatology:

The year 2000 has finally rolled by, carrying with it all the hopes and fearful prophesies it was burdened with. But apocalypse is yet to come. Some erudite prophets have discovered that the modern calendar is over one hundred years ahead of the ancient one on which the end-of-millennium doomsday prophesy was based. It is premature for atheists to jeer and rejoice, they warn, as they ring their bells in the…early hours of the morning…. (1)

The passage sounds humdrum, a reportage on humanity's undying capacity to imagine its doomsday. The anxieties and prophecies that have defined the year 2000 as the end of time are, as the magazine reports, spiraling into new speculations. New projections are taking shape to define diverse calendars of doom. The proponents of eschatology are too haughty and programmatic to allow humankind exhale that time itself has been kind to birth a new millennium. The propagation of fear is vociferous and the propagators are careful to dress their messages with the authority of faith. This is a ploy to present speculation as categorical truth. Thus, the Secretary-General (aka SG) can afford to fall asleep on this age-long spiritualization of the

unknown (possibly unknowable); but the sheer prescience of the passage cannot be ignored as it heralds the arrival of a "god-figure." The arrival of the personage, a self-proclaimed God, challenges traditional habits of thought.

As the unusual visitor forces his presence on the SG, and he declares "I am God," it is easy for the SG to dismiss the visitor as just another crank. God and/or divinity has been consistent in the rhetoric and kerygma of humanity. Time has never been short of religious claims and visions; and time has never been short of individuals who put themselves in positions of spiritual authority. Here is a personage that is able to force himself into the presence of civil authority, and civil authority is pushed to make room for the personage's intrusion. Civil authority is unable to keep the intrusion in check. A power-centre caves because a strange power has upset established balance.

The visiting personage is strangely unstoppable but his person and aura are not consistent with known liturgies, particularly the Christian variety which is at the base of Western religiosity. There is always strangeness at the origins of divinities. Deification is hinged on a perception or interpretation of the supernatural which is in turn presented as persuasion and/or enforcement of belief. Such beginnings, even when crude or spurious, become sanitized and codified with time. Given that divine apparitions are safe and protected in the realm of faith but hardly in the austere eyes of modern-day secularism, the visit of Mr. God (as the SG mockingly calls him) has fallen at a time when the world has already determined and named its deities.

It appears that there is a closure on any new form of apotheosis. Thus, people of divine carriage have been inclined to either become media for existing deities or novel apparitions of existing deities. Even those modes attract skepticism. Mr. God fits into the paradigm. He does not claim to be a new divinity. He claims to be a material manifestation of God with a pious capital letter that has become a marker of Christian liturgy. However, his personage is inconsistent with established kerygma. The Christian God is not known to physically reveal himself, except once in the Man-God manifestation of Jesus which is believed to have been subject to fetal conception. Therefore, the SG's doubt is clearly understandable. The only reason why Mr. God has an audience here with the SG is because the former carries a force that has undermined the security infrastructure and apparatus in this most secured of places.

Mr. God forces what he describes as a routine visit on the UN's boss. There is no evidence of a previous visit of this kind in living memory. In a later conversation, Mr. God claims that he last visited earth five thousand years ago (12). That timespan

hardly indicates that the present visit is a routine. There is more in the unsaid. Christian history is wont to say that Jesus (the manifest God) was on earth about two thousand years ago or a little above that. If Mr. God places his last visit beyond that timeline and outside textual or historical affirmation, then he is entirely a new spirituality or materiality, unanchored on Christianity because he does not acknowledge or connect to the crucial plinth of the faith.

The SG does well to study the physical features of Mr. God. The attributes of this new claimant of the name of God call attention to themselves. The narrator says:

He was truly extraordinary. He was about eight feet in height, but in America that is not astonishing. What was unusual was the man's large head which measured nearly eighteen inches across. It was out of proportion even with the tall frame. The face was handsome and genial but its sheer size was terrifying. The eyes were nearly the size of tennis balls and seemed to possess a mesmerizing power. (3)

As much as Mr. God looks human, his oversized features give him intriguing strangeness. His bodily parts cannot be touched. There is an "invisible wall" around him (3). It is impossible to confirm if his bodily features are made of flesh. Thus, the reality or irreality of the wall denies tactile contact, reinforces the unknowable, and makes his claim to divinity inscrutable. The wall is a symbol of the unreachable. His divinity is only visible to the extent which he presents himself but he remains a subject of speculation.

When Chris, the sergeant, tells the SG about the invisible wall around Mr. God, the SG replies: "Chris, you are a joker" (3). To which Chris says: "No, sir…. That is the gospel truth" (3). Chris says more than he truly intends to say. The term "gospel truth" is loaded with irony because the fact of Mr. God's existence is a subversion of the Gospel's truth and an inauguration of a new way of knowing the world in relation to its creator. Every claim to a "gospel truth" is thus overturned by the wall that stands between perception and creed. What follows Chris' observation is an unusual conversation between the SG and Mr. God. Now that the authority of the SG has been undermined before his subordinates, his last resort is to raise his wit above his exasperation.

It is important to note the sheer earthiness of the SG's conversation with Mr. God. The SG first believes that his visitor is a crank playing a hi-tech gimmick, then he later comes to suspect that his visitor is an extraterrestrial being. This keeps the SG's perception within the realm of science, not religion. Yet, the situation is not clear. In this atmosphere, it is the visitor, Mr. God, that appears at home with himself. Mr.

God tells the SG to "summon a meeting of the Security Council" (4). Whereas the visitor makes his request as if he is asking for a normal event, the SG understands that it will be difficult to "advertise" a God who has presented himself outside liturgy. The SG tells his visitor: "Descend from the clouds with a blast of trumpets so that all eyes will behold you and tremble. Then, I would have no problems summoning the Security Council" (6). The SG is trying at this point to make Mr. God fit into liturgy.

The miraculous and/or supernatural have always been the selling point of divinity. In the SG's considered opinion, an invisible wall and intriguing bodily features are not earth-shaking enough to command global awe. That implies that Mr. God's strangeness cannot support the weight of his claim. A personage that engages in debate and roots himself in the mode of science (speculative or not) is too earthy. Science can present wonders and inspire amazing discoveries but its expanding horizons are normalized by the mundane processes that put it within the orbit of humankind. There is something about Mr. God that places him outside that orbit.

The SG's expectation is quite human. He believes that a claimant of the office of God has to be capable of enacting a grand entry that can arrest attention. But Mr. God says that "would disturb the human mind more than is necessary" (6). Mr. God avoids the dramatic but he seems to know the nature of humankind. He advises the SG to craft his message in the best possible manner that can impress the members of the Security Council: "Tell them that an extraterrestrial creature with unusual appearance and power has visited you and wants to speak with them. Get your security men to sign as witnesses. That should do it." (7). It is the language of science, not faith, that makes the meeting possible.

The difference between science and divinity is at play in the story. By regular practice, science is human and it presents itself as a human affair. On the other hand, divinity presents itself as supernatural but it demands human acceptance and submission in spite of its often limited revelation. By claiming supernatural origin, ontology, and medium, divinity commands infallibility and ignores the evidence that shows that it is subject to human interpretation and propagation. It is the human capacity to imagine and domesticate the knowledge of divinity that makes us at home with its strangeness. Therefore, as Mr. God comes on the scene, he confuses the patterns by rooting himself in science. The titles of God and creator, which Mr. God claims, have age-long cultural associations that make it difficult for the SG (and the later audience) to see their visitor strictly as a God of science, not a God of faith. It

is even more difficult to note that the creator, by his own admission, is also a creature of the cosmos.

Many things are not explained. Mr. God has a functional phone number (8). At first, he refuses to disclose his address (8), but he later tells the council that he hails from a star in the vicinity of Orion nebula (15). He does not eat human food or take human drinks (9). On the first day, he is dressed in "a bluish-grey gown like a priest" (3). He is punctual to appointments (10). He drives a car (16-18). In all his interactions, his language is human and intelligible. It is perhaps this earthiness that causes the council to treat him poorly. In contrast to Mr. God's demeanour, the members of the Security Council are jumpy, impolite, and impatient. The traditional self-importance of human power and influence pales in comparison to the deep essence of their guest. It is this same guest, who has sought to connect with humanity, that must pass the test of divinity in one of the key ways that humans prove the divine.

Mr. God is required to perform some miracles to earn himself a seat before the human eminence of the Security Council. The SG has earlier given a hint that humans are impressed by the ability to perform miracles. The human condition is riddled with difficulties that create an insatiable search for the miraculous. In their limited knowledge of the divine, humans latch onto the alleviation of pain and sorrow as a key premise on which divinity must be hinged. In this story, sick persons are brought to Mr. God. But the anger and violence of a certain unhappy man (who had lost his family in an accident a day before) adds two corpses and four injured persons to Mr. God's assignment.

The unhappy man, a shooter, is a minor character in the story. But he reveals something important. He depicts human rage in the face of tragedy. He feels abandoned by the very divinity that liturgy has called the last solace and ultimate protector of humankind. His displeasure is fierce, but he is unable to hurt Mr. God. He kills and injures bystanders. It is painful to see how one victim of existence creates other victims. Surprisingly, Mr. God pays no attention to the unhappy and aggressive man as if to say that divinity cannot be blackmailed into showing acts of kindness. The indestructibility of Mr. God mocks the unhappy man's aggression. Mr. God leaves him to his mess. Mr. God leaves the human system to tame the aggression. Neither Mr. God nor anyone responds to the charge of dereliction which the said man has levelled against divinity. And that is a strong point in this narrative. It appears that Mr. God, like every other God before or around him, is incapable of erasing human tragedies.

Mr. God's power is obviously awesome and extensive. But his willingness to help humankind is starkly limited by his personal choice or preference. However, he does not fail to save those he has elected to save. Not by instant healing. He passes his test by restoring the subjects of his test to health, and he earns a seat to dialogue with the knowledgeable persons that the UN is careful to assemble. None of the healed persons is able to recall enough to offer useful information to curious humanity. Even with Mr. God, the ways of the divine are nebulous. Should they have expected more from a being that hails from the nebula?

Humanity's coup de grace comes after Mr. God's highly photographed, videoed, and recorded dialogue with the world's experts. No one is able to capture the conversation. The world's media technology is shamed. Humanity has to clutch to word-of-mouth and flips of memory. Instead of certitude, conjectures become the vehicles to carry such a momentous event through the shifting stations of history. Each participant or experiencer of the event can tell the story but it lacks the fire of truth (20). "Predictably," says the narrator, "there were disputes over the exact words and phrases used by God" (20). That does not stop humanity from making merchandise of their versions of truth (21).

Thus, Mr. God's visit leaves no illumination. It leaves more confusion. All the texts that are produced about Mr. God's visit bear the usual blight of the divine. Between a God of science and a God of faith, there is no terra firma for belief. On this earth, the estate of divinity is built on the quicksand of human credulity. Somehow, they manage to keep standing in human speculation. That is a subject matter for speculative science fiction at its best, such as is re-enacted in a different time context in "Song of the Vanquished."

There is an important reflection on the theme of God (but no god-figure) in "Song of the Vanquished." The story depicts the elevation of science, speculative that is. The narrator sets the story in 4157; it is over 2, 146 years ahead of the publication date of the story. As expected, it is a different world in those centuries ahead. Nigeria still exists and it has moved to the centre of scientific scholarship. One of Nigeria's earliest academic institutions, the University of Ibadan, is in the spotlight. Amadi has not quite moved from the global symbolism of power as depicted by the UN and its SG (in "When God Came") to the global symbolism of learning as depicted by an elite Nigerian university (in "Song of the Vanquished"); the UN's role persists in this second story. As in the first story, what happens in the second has global import and impact. The year 4157 marks the collapse of all the giant leaps in science and development.

At the beginning, the participant narrator, who remains unknown till the story's end, is with a number of persons in "a small ship" that is "floating on a shoreless sea" (39). They are floating because they have no control. Death is certain but tenacity makes the persons sing "religious songs;" religion has become "their last link with sanity" (39). In the face of disaster, humanity has remained conscious of God. Scientific calamity causes religion (the most unscientific of processes) to become humanity's last station of anchor which, of course, is a synonym for resignation.

Centuries before this calamity, humans have achieved a lot of exploits: perfection of nuclear fusion, energy abundance, abundance of mineral resources and renewable technology, ability to grow food sufficiently from the Sahara to Antarctica, discovery of exotic plants, interplanetary travels (except for Jupiter and Mercury), traffic of spacecraft, establishment of outposts on Mars, the vanity of burials in space (which becomes a source of pollution), etc. The UN's intervention stops further burials of corpses in space (39-41).

Humankind is at the height of existence. The feat is unprecedented. The story's narrator says: …by the year 4000, man controlled the earth as never before. The vagaries of the earth's climate were forgotten. Rain fell only when it was convenient for man and tornado was chanelled along predetermined paths. Man was secure on earth which had now grown too small for him, but the direct leap outside his own solar system still eluded him. (41)

In spite of the height of advancement, there is a limitation. There is always a gap in knowledge or a blind spot that time never fails to reveal. Thus, the narrator notes "that TIME" is "the ultimate guardian of the Universe," and "God's insurmountable fence" (42). Once more, as in "When God Came," a wall/fence becomes a metaphor for the dimensions of knowledge beyond humanity's ken. Humankind has genetically engineered the rebirth of dinosaurs from regenerated skeletons (43) and has performed many other acts, but it never ceases to wonder about the elusive essence of God.

For those in the story who reject the existence of God and believe that "matter must have come into being through the agency of a great Universal Source of Energy," it is easy to state that "matter itself is energy" (45-46). Some conclude that "God must be a Great Universal Mind" that is "different from matter" (46). Both are positions of convenience in a world where humans know too much and too little. If matter proves that it cannot be fully graspable, how can God's abstraction be fully known?

Professor Ekpo, in a moment of despair, exclaims that "matter is immaterial" and he throws the entire concept of materiality into ridicule (45). His epiphany is unsustainable. There is no laboratory anywhere that can support it. His university is a beehive of research, but he is "not equipped" enough to prove his disturbing theory (48). The paper (simply entitled the "Decadence of the Species"), which he presents to the UN Symposium on the Human Condition, appears more like a product of intuition or observation, not scientific empiricism. It stirs a debate on the materiality of humans in a world where time places the materiality of the earth and its life at risk.

Professor Ekpo insists that there is a "death mechanism" which "operates inexorably" in living things and that humans are not spared that blight (51). Beyond derision, his idea is censored. Even as a member of the world's Order of Savants, he is tried under the Dangerous Discovery Law and given a suspended prison sentence. At a time when humans can prolong their lives and regain youth through medication and other processes, Professor Ekpo's thought upsets basic assumptions. At first, only his lover, Habiba (a biochemist), believes the integrity of his paper.

Time proves Professor Ekpo right. A universal computer in Singapore, TEDIUM MARK X (one of the only two on earth), shows that nuclear holocaust is a most likely cause of mass death on earth. Scientists, beginning with Professor Tata of Bombay University, come to notice a rise in radiation level. The nuclear reactors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, thought to have been safely dumped in the sea, are leaking radioactive ashes and polluting the earth. The species are at risk from human praxis. The limitations of the past become the decadence of the present. The world's politics is undermined by its shenanigans (70-71) as the world's science turns the earth to "a liquid sphere" (81).

In Nigeria, the coastal cities are the first to be submerged (79). Professor Ekpo and his lover are victims of the disaster. His associate, Professor Kwaki, reveals his identity as the narrator at this point as he writes this story before his own impending death. It is recalled that Professor Kwaki, yet unnamed at the start of the story, expresses a commitment to writing even though he is unsure of a future readership (39). At the end, a second voice (unnamed) says that the story is recovered on "Kilimanjaro's peak in 9010 by a team of Nigerian and Kenyan archaeologists" (82). Professor Kwaki's story is discovered 4,853 years after the disaster of 4157. A narrative tends to outlive generations of humans and brings a past into a present. The second voice also says: "Today in 9012, the earth is truly green and life-threatening

pollution has been eliminated" (82). It is a declaration of regeneration, a little short of hubris.

Conclusion

The subject matters of Amadi's stories are truly gripping. Between spirituality and ecological concern, here is a work that places humankind at the centre of existence. Obinna Nwodim, Uzo Nwamara, and Priye Iyalla-Amadi have stated that Amadi's "science background" is responsible for his interest in science fiction (90). As a physicist and writer, Amadi makes bold projections in his science fiction.

The peculiar tragedy of Amadi's text is that an advancement in human knowledge is often undermined by human limitations. The human community in "When God Came" is different from the one in "Song of the Vanquished." The first has what appears as advanced science knocking on its door but it is unable to learn anything beyond its own fixation on the divine. It turns out that the divine is as elusive as ever. This is worsened by the human community's inability to determine the veracity of Mr. God's knowledge. Mr. God's strange aura is obvious, and it is not easy to connect with him because his essence cannot be domesticated and normalized.

In "Song of the Vanquished," the human community has made giant leaps. Scientific knowledge is high. Technology is both effective and frenetic. There are no margins in the human collective. Africa, as represented by Professor Ekpo, has made its way to the centre of scholarship. But the nature of human power and authority is not free of its base instincts. And the nature of science is not free of blind spots. Both failings become a truly toxic combination, powerful enough to usher in catastrophe. The failings of the past destroy the present.

In Amadi's work, neither faith nor science offers an escape from life. But advancement is possible, always possible. Both stories show that there are dimensions of knowledge ahead of humanity. They also show that matter suffers but it persists in a text that depicts what Patrouch calls "scientifically plausible alternate settings for human consciousness" (xv).

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