

Religious expression
in adichie's the thing
around your neck



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Adichie's collection of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, is a powerful testimony of Nigerian culture as resonated within each and every Nigerian in their homeland and in America. Intertwined with several aspects of culture, she explores the idea of faith and religious expression in well-educated, "Americanized" Nigerians as compared to the long-established conventions of religious practice in traditional Nigerian culture. The stories "A Private Experience," "Ghosts," and "The Shivering," characterize Americanized Nigerians' attempts to understand the role of faith, superstition, and expression of religion in their lives.

In all three stories, the protagonists are well-educated, or pursuing a higher education, and struggle to perceive the religious traditions of their people as anything but antiquated. Like the professor in "Ghosts," they are "Western-educated" and "[are] supposed to have armed [themselves] with enough science to laugh indulgently at the ways of [their] people." (57) The retired professor describes the superstitious practice of grabbing handfuls of sand from the ground and throwing it at somebody presumed to be dead when he encounters Ikenna Okoro; in "The Shivering," Ukamaka (who is working on her dissertation at Princeton) deems Chinedu's "Nigerian Pentecostal way" of "bloodying and binding" in prayer unnecessary and pugilistic (143); Chika, in "A Private Experience," mentally disproves the Hausa woman's perception of the riots as evil by pulling from her sister's academic understanding that "riots do not happen in a vacuum." (48) Poorer, less educated people are depicted as more spiritually connected to their faith and superstitions than their scholastic counterparts. For example, the Hausa woman's fragmented sentences, the description of her attire – "...flimsy pink

and black scarf, with the garish prettiness of cheap things” – and her business in onion trading all point to the fact that she is underprivileged. (44) During their encounter, Chika finds herself wondering if the Hausa woman’s mind “ is large enough to grasp” the terms and concepts that she so easily chalks up to forces of good and evil. (48) She dutifully performs her prayer ritual for their safety while Chika sits and thinks about how to rationalize what is happening to her. The professor describes the curses of “ tattered men who were clustered under the flame tree” – how they energetically damn the vice chancellor, whom they have accused of stealing money from everybody’s pensions – and compares them to hawkers, conjuring an image of rugged men, people much like the Hausa woman, making a small living by selling goods in the streets. (58) These “ modernized” characters exist in a class separate from the poorer, less-educated people and therefore are separated from the beliefs their people have always maintained.

There are multiple references to America, or “ Americanized” people, being seen as “ sterile” and restrained in religious expression – not just in faith, but in practice. (67) Perhaps as a reflection of their assimilation into modernized culture, Adichie’s protagonists demonstrate the circumspect distance they were taught to afford religion; they approach ideas of theology with cynicism and the polite coldness of skeptics. Guarded by the cushions of academia, they have lost touch with the doctrines of their respective faiths – so much so, in fact, that dynamic religious practices make them uncomfortable. In “ A Private Experience,” Chika averts her eyes when the Hausa woman kneels on the ground to pray and wishes that she could also take comfort in a belief of God, if only to share the experience or know how to act in its place. The

rosary on her finger seems frivolous without any faith to back it, and she finds herself awkwardly fingering the beads, alien to an institution and a practice that she had never observed with any depth. In “The Shivering,” Ukamaka refrains from telling Chinedu that his prayer ritual is extraneously overzealous for fear of sounding “sanctimonious,” unable to articulate her own faith in “that redeeming matter-of-fact dryness” that reassures her in her own church. (143) The vigor with which Chinedu – who, as she later discovers, has lived in Nigeria until very recently and is therefore more tightly connected to Nigerian rituals – exercises his prayer makes her uneasy. Like many Americans regularly attending mass at the Catholic Church, Ukamaka prefers the pensive, dispassionate “kneeling and standing and worshipping idols” that Chinedu dislikes. (164) The juxtaposition of the two Church scenes – Father Patrick walking up and down aisles, “flicking” water on his congregation, and the Nigerian priest striding between pews, “splashing and swirling, holy water raining down” – is a brilliant summation of the differences in religious expression between Nigerian and American cultures. (186)

Despite all this, Adichie's protagonists still struggle to recognize what they feel they should believe and what they actually believe. Each of the three make references to a faith they have once abandoned, repudiated, or returned to after a withdrawal of practice for different reasons. Most essentially, they attempt to understand the notion of an afterlife and their God's role in it within the confines of science and practiced rationalization. In “Ghosts,” the professor grapples with the “tightly rigid boundaries of what is considered real” when his deceased wife begins to visit him in his home.

(67) He stops going to church on Sundays because “ it is our diffidence about the afterlife that leads us to religion... [and he] was no longer uncertain.”

(71) He regards the superstitions of his people as silly, yet is firm in the understanding that his wife's soul exists beyond the constraints of death, a realization he cannot admit to his colleagues – not even to Ikenna, a man who had just, in most senses of the word, reappeared after death – because it goes against the teachings they devoted their lives to. In “ The Shivering,” Chinedu explains to Ukamaka that the plane crash was “ a punishment and a wake-up call” for Nigerian people because of the corruption they allow in their country, prompting her to question whether God saves some people and not others because He favors them. (152) Chinedu is satisfied with his own explanation – that “ God's ways are not our ways” – but Ukamaka is still unsettled and needs a logical justification for the deaths of all those that did not survive the wreckage. (147) The omniscient narrator in “ A Private Experience” fast-forwards Chika's story enough to reveal that Chika's family will “ offer Masses over and over for Nnedi to be found safe, though never for the repose of Nnedi's soul.” (52) The statement is telling of her community's denial, and further emphasizes the idea of sheltered sterility that is so prevalent throughout Adichie's short works – the assertion that “ riots like this were what happened to other people,” not people like Chika or Ukamaka or even the professor. (47)

Weaved into each and every sentence is Adichie's remarkable ability to capture the efforts of modern Nigerian people to come to terms with and express things they have been taught not to understand – their faith and personal connection with their God.