

The African Writer and the Drama of Social Change

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I

THE PREPONDERANT role played by European languages in Africa tends to falsify the literary picture of the continent by creating the impression that every African author necessarily writes in English, French, or Portuguese, the languages that came to Africa through colonialism. The impression is reinforced by the common practice of dividing Africa according to the spheres of influence of these languages; thus one hears of Anglophone African states, Francophone African states, and Lusophone African states. Consequently, one often forgets that in spite of the immense prestige of these languages, most Africans communicate in African languages, a point that is crucial in determining the use of the term "African Writer."

Broadly speaking, there are three categories of writers in Africa: first, those who write in African languages; second, those who do not have a firm command of European languages but still use them as vehicles of literary expression; and third, those who, like Achebe, Senghor and Honwana have so mastered these languages that they have successfully used them in establishing their literary reputation. In Nigeria, for example, the three groups are well represented. The first group includes such authors as Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the late Prime Minister of Nigeria, who wrote *Shaihu Umar*, a novel in Hausa dealing with the fortunes of a distinguished teacher; Chikeizu, whose play *Udo Ka Mma (Peace is Better)* occupies a prominent place in Igbo literature; and Fagunwa, whose numerous works in Yoruba have

distinguished him as a great novelist.¹ The second category of writers is generally associated with the famous Onitsha Market literature.² Onitsha is a market town in Nigeria, which is well known for its small-scale publishing houses connected with the booming printing business of the city. The authors belonging to this literary tradition, such as Ogali and Anya,³ do not write in conventional standard English since they do not generally have a firm command of the language. The third category of writers embraces such well-known figures as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Elechi Amadi, and Ola Rotimi, whose works in English have given them international recognition. Along with their counterparts in other African countries writing mostly in English (e.g., Ngugi Wa Thiong'o of Kenya, Kofi Awoonor of Ghana, Peter Abrahams of South Africa); French (e.g., Léopold Senghor of Senegal, Bernard Dadié of Ivory Coast, Yambo Ouologuem of Mali); and Portuguese (e.g., Bernado Honwana and Augustine Neto of Mozambique), they constitute a group to which the term "African writer" is often exclusively but erroneously applied. They wield a tremendous influence in the continent because of the socio-economic prestige of the languages in which they write, even though their audience in Africa is limited to the few Africans who have a competent knowledge of the languages. The term "African writer" used in this study refers to that group of writers who, having at first internalized the colonial experience through a conscious and unconscious assimilation of the linguistic habits of the colonizers, use the languages of the colonial masters to rebel against the colonial experience and assert a new image of the African, which has been grossly distorted by colonialism and post-independent, decadent governments of Africa.

The writers are caught up in a drama of social change characterized by a feverish quest for a regenerated Africa in which the humanity of the African is positively asserted. This quest is also a feature of the activities of many African governments, whose policies are frequently attacked by these writers. Zaire, for example, has forced her citizens to drop their European names for African ones; Tanzania has dropped English and adopted Swahili as the country's national language (a decision whose impact is felt not only in Africa but also in America where some Afro-

American writers, out of cultural pride, use Swahili expressions in their works); and Nigeria has decided to use Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba in addition to English as the official languages of the nation. In fact, the drama of social change in Africa has generated problems requiring urgent solutions. How could a homogeneous political unit be created out of the various national entities that live within the confines of political boundaries created by the colonialists? What means can be used to ensure the economic and political independence of the African states? How could Southern Africa successfully withstand the forces of the racist white-settler regimes? In what ways could the African cultural heritage serve as the foundation for the socio-economic development of the various peoples of the continent? What is the place of a foreign language in the national development of a people?

The African writer reacts in various ways to these problems. The reactions are so varied that they cannot be comprehensively handled here. It is therefore pertinent to limit the discussion to only four topical areas: language, the nature of literature, the adoption of foreign names, and political activism.

II

Various peoples of the world have at some moment of their history agitated for the recognition of their national languages as valid media of expression. The Finns, the Welsh, the Italians, the English, the French, the Arabs, the Vietnamese, the French Canadians, to mention but a few, have all rightly stressed the importance of restoring the dignity of their cultural heritage by the use of their mother tongues as instruments of socio-cultural growth. Wartburg captures the spirit of this linguistic nationalism in his observation on the role played by the Pléiade in the fight for developing the French language: "Le livre est intéressant surtout comme manifestation du sentiment national et parce qu'il montre que l'auteur a bien compris le rapport entre la langue d'une nation et son rôle parmi les peuples civilisés." ("The book is especially interesting as a manifestation of the national sentiment and because it shows that the author has well understood the

relationship between the language of a nation and its role among civilized peoples.”)⁴

African writers are haunted by the spectre of this linguistic nationalism. Attitudes to the issue range between two extreme positions: the total rejection of European languages, and their continued use as the dominant languages of Africa. Obi Wali's classic and controversial view is typical of the first. In his polemical article “The Dead End of African Literature” he pours scorn at the idea of using European languages as media of literary expression in Africa; after all, he asserts:

The distinction between French and German literature, for instance, is that one is written in French, and the other in German. All the other distinctions, whatever they may be, are based on this fundamental fact. What therefore is now described as African literature in English and French is a clear contradiction, and a false proposition just as “Italian literature in Hausa” would be. There is little doubt that African languages will face inevitable extinction if they do not embody some kind of intelligent literature, and the way to hasten this is by continuing in our present illusion that we can produce African literature in English and French.⁵

Although Wali's solicitude for the survival of African languages merits some praise, it operates in a way that ignores the historical, political, economic, and socio-linguistic factors that force Africans to use European languages as media of literary expression. These very factors unwittingly make Wali's position a little absurd, for they force him to practice what he condemns: using English as a medium for condemning authors writing in European languages. Nevertheless, his position is less objectionable than that of such writers as Senghor and Okala whose edification of European languages tends to support the arguments of Eurocentric scholars who tend to believe that Africa has no languages.

Senghor is so much in love with French language that he has pioneered the *Francophonie*, a movement aimed at uniting all the French-speaking peoples of the world. According to him it is a mode of thought and action; indeed, the spirit of French civilization: “. . . la Francophonie, c'est, par-dela la langue, la civilisation française; plus précisément, l'esprit de cette civilisation, c'est-à dire la culture française. Que j'appellerai la Francité.”

("... Francophony is, beyond the language, the French civilization; more precisely, the spirit of this civilization, that is, the French culture. Which I will call the Francité.") He even insists that the African is psychologically attached to the French language because "nous ne voulons renier de notre histoire, fut-elle 'coloniale', qui est devenu un élément de notre personnalité nationale" ("we do not want to renounce our history, 'colonial' though it be, for it has become an element in our national personality"); moreover, the French language has wonderful qualities of "clarté et richesse, précision et nuance."⁶ Senghor frames his adulation of the language in such a way as to negate the principle that each language is capable and rich enough to express the modes of thought of a people.

His argument echoes that made by the proponents of Commonwealth literature. These scholars assume that all the peoples of the Commonwealth countries share a common culture in the English language, even though there are several other languages within the unwieldy political club which carry the weight of civilizations distinct from that of the Anglo-Saxons. Okola's argument in his introduction to *Drum Beat* falls in line with this false proposition: "It is no longer fashionable to attack the use of the English language in Africa as a vestige of colonialism, and an editor does not need to apologise for offering the public an anthology of poetry in a language that was once alien to the majority of his local readers."⁷ It is erroneous to think that the English language can no longer be considered foreign to the majority of East Africans. Okola may well be one of those whom Okot p' Bitek has in mind while assailing this attitude in his *Song of Lawino*.⁸

It will take a long time before this issue of language is settled in Africa. Until then, one can continue to discuss African literatures written in European languages as if they were inseparable components of the African cultural heritage, while remembering to make attempts to encourage the growth of literatures in African languages. In this respect, it is pertinent to refer to the positions of Bernard Dadié and Wole Soyinka. In *Un nègre à Paris*, a work which demystifies the pretensions of the French colonialists

in Africa, Dadié rightly expresses the fear that if African languages are not given the chance to play their legitimate role in African societies they may eventually disappear :

Une fierté que nous ne connaîtrons peut-être jamais puisque la langue chez nous se meurt et qu'ainsi chaque jour nos racines émergent telles celles d'un baobab que déchaussent les pluies. Cette fièvre de dépersonnalisation doit inquiéter les Parisiens qui préfèrent nous étudier à travers nos masques. Nos larmes et nos rires, nos craintes et nos rêves, nos amours — seuls les masques les peuvent traduire avec fidélité.

(The pride that we shall perhaps never possess since our languages are dying off: each day our roots surface like those of the baobab tree being exposed by rain. This fever of depersonalisation ought to worry the Parisians who prefer to study us through our masks. Our tears and our laughs, our fears and our dreams, our loves — only the masks can translate them with fidelity.⁹)

As for Wole Soyinka, he has persistently called for the adoption of Swahili as the continental *lingua franca* of the Africans. In fact, one of the aims of the Union of Writers of the African Peoples, of which he is a staunch member, is "to give especial encouragement to the literature of Africa in indigenous languages and at the same time promote the adoption of a single language for the continent of Africa, as an instrument and symbol of the unity of African people everywhere (it must be understood that this language is intended to be a common means of expression and communication accessible to all, *not* a replacement of existing languages)."¹⁰

It is extremely difficult at this moment of Africa's historical development to do away with European languages which still play a vital role in the complex task of nation-building. It would be advisable for writers using these languages to try to be as close as possible to the speech patterns of African languages and the modes of thought of the African cultures. Two main tendencies are discernible in the effort of writers moving along this direction. (1) An author may choose to write in the mother tongue and then translate the work into a chosen European language. Okot p' Bitek of Uganda, J. P. Clark and Gabriel Okara of Nigeria, A. C. Jordan and Mazisi Kunene of South Africa are ex-

amples of such writers. (2) A writer may choose to write in the European language while trying to maintain the speech patterns of his mother tongue. Such writers as Achebe, Clark, Rotimi, and Kourouma have followed this method.

III

Many mathematically oriented critics in considering the nature of literature try to make us believe that a literary object is to the art of creativity what a plant is to botany; that is to say that the literary object can be broken intrinsically into analysable component parts. Yet, one remembers that literature is a very complex and even mysterious mode of human activity that defies satisfactory scientific analyses. After all, is literary object simply composed of words and sentences that are non-representative of man's feelings? Does the author not react in a certain way to his own social environment? Are these reactions not reflected in the world and structure of the work? In order to understand the position of most of the African writers, one should think less of Kant's idea of "purposive purposelessness of a work of art"; of Eliot's concept of "objective correlative" or unified sensibility; of Vivas's immanence of meanings and values within the artistic object; of Alain Robbe-Grillet's insistence on the semantic void of a literary object; of Croce's "poesia" of quality of feeling; and even of I. A. Richard's theory of "stock responses." All these positions, however amorphous they may appear, have something in common: the idea that meaning inhabits a literary work of art intrinsically; that a literary artist is not a translator of a private, pre-existing idea by which the developing poetic context is controlled. In short, that literature is a non-referential, self-contained activity that states no propositional truth.

Most of the African writers believe that there is a direct relationship between literature and social institutions. The principal function of literature is to criticize these institutions and eventually bring about desirable changes in the society. Ferdinand Oyono, Mongo Beti, Bernard Dadié, Léopold Senghor, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe (to mention but a few) — all have used literature as an instrument of fighting against colonialism.

In their various visions of society, the colonial regime is portrayed as oppressive, corrupt, and inept to serve as a viable substitute to the African way of life. One could therefore understand why Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir* was unpopular with Africans when it was published in 1953. The world it depicted was too idyllic for Laye's contemporaries who thought that the novel did not portray the devastating effects of colonialism on African society. Mongo Beti even referred the author to a novel with a similar name, Richard Wright's *Black Child*, which dramatized the hallucinating effect of racism on the life of a young black American from the South.

In South Africa, the writer exposes the brutalities meted out to the African by the white minority regime. For instance, Nkosi's *The Rhythm of Violence* deals with the struggles of a racially mixed group of youngsters to correct the social injustices being meted out to the Africans. "Rhythm" is at one level the music of jazz which gives a psychological boost to the oppressed Africans and at another a pattern of life which has violence as its motivating force. Alfred Hutchinson's *The Rain Killers*, while dealing obliquely with the same problem, lays emphasis on the confrontation between the Western and African civilizations and its impact on the life of the Africans. Peter Abrahams's *Mine Boy*, *Wild Conquest* and *A Wreath for Udomo* stress the socio-economic and cultural deprivations of the Africans. Other writers like Es'kia Mphahlele, Dennis Brutus, Mazisi Kunene, and Mongane Serote use their writings to evoke their unpleasant experiences in South Africa.

In the independent African countries, the emphasis is laid on depicting the failures of the governments to provide the much-needed fruits of independence to the people. Most of the writers have turned their attention from the fascination of the past to the problems of the contemporary society. For instance, Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* dramatizes the political situation of a newly independent African nation in which the politicians are so corrupt that a coup d'état eventually overthrows the civilian government. Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* depicts Ghana as a land of social and political decay. Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de violence* decries the ruthless killings carried on by the

rulers of Nakem in collaboration with colonial administrators. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Black Hermit* calls attention to the problem of national unity which bedevils Africa today, and his most recent novel *Petals of Blood* bemoans the miserable lot of African peasants.

All in all, there is a general belief that literature can play a great role in straightening the patterns of social change in Africa. As Kofi Awoonor of Ghana puts it, the writer "has to provide a vision for those who are going to order his society. . . . he must be a person who has some kind of conception of the society in which he is living and the way he wants the society to go."¹¹

Four points resume the position of the African writer. (1) Literature is referential: a literary work of art uses structures to convey meanings, a point of view that contradicts MacLeish's much quoted dictum which states that a "poem does not mean / but be." The African writer seems to be saying that an artist through a careful manipulation of symbols, images, modes and other literary devices conveys ideas about life and society which give the reader food for thought. (2) Reality exists independent of the mind; that is to say, that it is prior and not posterior to the consciousness of the artist. (3) Through a careful control of the powers of the imagination, an artist may cultivate a state of consciousness which, while not cleansed of all subjective distortion, can enable him to gain access to this reality and project a world which depicts life in three major ways: as it should be (idealistically), as it is (realistically), or worse than it is (satirically, polemically, etc.). (4) Literature is the product of society. This does not necessarily mean that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the world of literary works and the structure of social institutions. Such a view would be crudely reductionist; rather it means that literature makes use of the materials of social reality to create a vision of life that would give the reader an insight into the hidden dynamics of social life.

IV

Many Africans see the rejection of foreign names in our societies as a way of regaining their lost cultural identity. Ihechukwu Madubuike, the present Federal Minister of Education in Nigeria

who dropped his Christian name "Godson" in favour of "Ihechukwu" articulates the rationale in these words:

Colonization as a system worked on the principle that everything African was primitive, barbarous, unholy. Everything from Europe, on the other hand, was pure and proper — *civilized*. Every effort was made to make Africans reject their own civilization and to look down on things African. To answer a white man's name was seen as one of the ways of becoming civilized, that is white. Thus, today, one frequently meets an African who will not be content until you have told him what your white, Christian name is.¹²

Many leading African politicians like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo of Nigeria, and Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire did drop their Christian names, while others like Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia retained theirs.

A similar phenomenon obtains among the writers: some have given up theirs while some have not. Chinua Achebe describes his personal experience in this way: "I was baptized Albert Chinualumogu. I dropped the tribute to Victorian England when I went to the University although you might find some early acquaintances still calling me by it. The earliest of them all — my mother — certainly stuck to it to the bitter end. So if anyone asks you what her Britannic Majesty Queen Victoria had in common with Chinua Achebe, the answer is: they both lost their Albert!"¹³ Okot p' Bitek's *Song of Lawino* contains an attack on Africans using Christian names:

Who understands
The meaning of the Christian names?
The names they read for
The names of white men
That they give to children
When they put water on their heads,
What do they mean?

To me
They all sound
Like empty tins,
Old rusty tins
Thrown down
From the roof-top.¹⁴

Among the writers who have responded to this form of cultural nationalism are Kofi Awoonor of Ghana (formerly George Awoonor-Williams), Ama Ata Aidoo of Ghana (formerly Christiana Aidoo), Ngugi Wa Thiong'o of Kenya (formerly James Ngugi), and Okogbule Wonodi of Nigeria (formerly Glory Wonodi).

It is important that a student of African literature be familiar with such a phenomenon, not only for its obvious implications for African pride, but also because an oversight may lead to his ascribing different authorship to works written by one person. Such vigilance is necessary until the social conflicts that generate such a situation are resolved by the dynamics of social change. The Catholic Church, for example, has already started the practice of allowing Africans to use their African names as valid names for baptism.

V

During the "African-Scandinavian Writers' Conference" held in Stockholm in 1967, Soyinka introduced the subject of political activism in a paper on the role of a writer in a modern state, when his remarks on gun-running and holding up radio stations triggered off a controversy among the participants:

Poets have lately taken to gun-running and writers are heard of holding up radio stations. In several independent states the writer is part of some underground movement; one coup at least in Africa is reputed to have involved a novelist and a poet.¹⁵

Alex la Guma felt that "in our society we are prepared to run guns and to hold up radio stations, if it is necessary"; Ngugi that "There is nothing wrong in running guns and holding up radio stations"; Bhély-Quênum that "On peut prendre le fusil, mais les éléments de l'information, comme la radio, sont aux mains de l'État. Comment peut-on les prendre sans être tout de suite précipité en prison? Nous savons ce que c'est." (One can take a gun, but the elements of information, like the radio, are in the hands of the state. How can one take them without at once being put into prison? We know what it entails.); U Tam'si that "la révolution ne se fait pas sur le place publique, pour l'écrivain" (for the writer the revolution is not carried out on a public

arena); and Nkosi that "it would be wrong I feel, to think that, when we are here discussing the problems of literature, we have also to discuss the problem of whether or not we are good citizens, that is to say, people who are responsible or people who are committed."¹⁶

It is noteworthy that during the Akintola regime in Western Nigeria, Soyinka was accused of holding up the state's radio station with a view to preventing the broadcast of the Premier's speech, but he was eventually discharged and acquitted of the charge. And during the war in Nigeria he was detained by the Nigerian government on suspicions of being in collaboration with the Biafran secessionist regime. Writers like J. P. Clark, Chinua Achebe, and Christopher Okigbo also got involved in the war. Okigbo lost his life on the Biafran side, an event that led to Ali Mazrui's *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* in which the poet is castigated for wasting his precious life on a frivolous cause. Dennis Brutus of South Africa has run guns for the overthrow of the Apartheid régime in South Africa. And Kofi Awoonor of Ghana and Ngugi wa Thiong'o of Kenya have recently been detained by their various governments for alleged subversive activities against their governments.

Is it a part of literary activity to take part in active politics? That Soyinka's remarks, which formed an insignificant part of his total argument, should be so emphasized during the discussion shows how dear the issue is to the hearts of writers. I think that personal involvement in politics is commendable but, as far as the writer is concerned, it is not necessary that he be an activist. There is no evidence that active participation in politics *necessarily* forms an integral part of the act of writing. It is as fallacious to assume that a writer has a social mission to be a political activist as it is to proclaim that a soldier has a duty to organize a coup and take over a government. Awoonor's observation is pertinent:

... the important factor is not that the African writer should carry a gun and should seize radio stations, but that he should make sure that he is not just doing these things for their own sakes. He is going to provide in his writings a certain articulate vision, which

must order his society because otherwise social life would be a very sterile and a very futile exercise.¹⁷

VI

To conclude briefly: the African writer cannot afford the luxury of withdrawing into the cocoon of creativity in the name of art for art's sake. As a participant in the drama of social change in Africa, he can use his skills to help shape the future of the society. Two poets, Christopher Okigbo of Nigeria and Tchicaya U Tam'si of Congo seem to illustrate this point, for in the early part of their career they tended to relish the idea of playing the role of Poet of poets *à la Mallarmé*, but later they burst out of their cocoon by being less esoteric and even making overt political statements in their works. Okigbo's *The Path of Thunder* is a collection of poetry with an apocalyptic vision of society and U Tam'si's play on Chaka is a celebration of the African's quest for freedom and dignity. However, it is not conceivable that every writer should be a political activist, for playing such a role depends on how each artist *as an individual* responds psychologically to the overwhelming pressures emanating from the prevailing power structure of the society. What may be imperative for the writers to do is to often try to write in their mother tongues.

NOTES

- ¹ Balewa, *Shaihu Umar* (Zaria: Asskiya Corp., 1955); Chikeizu, *Udo Ka Mma* (Ibadan: OUP, 1974); for Fagunwa, see for example *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale*, trans. Wole Soyinka as *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga* (London: Nelson, 1968).
- ² See, for example, Donatus Nwoga, "Onitsha Market Literature," *Transition*, 4, No. 19 (1965), 26-33; and Emmanuel Obiechina, *An African Popular Literature: A Study of Onitsha Market Pamphlets* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1973).
- ³ Ogali, *Veronica My Daughter* (Onitsha: Appolos Brothers, 1957); Anya, *She Died in the Bloom of Youth* (Onitsha: Tabansi, 1952).
- ⁴ "Le français dans la littérature" in *Evolution et structure de langue française* (Berne: Francke, 1946), p. 149. This and all subsequent translations are mine.
- ⁵ "The Dead End of African Literature," *Transition*, 4, No. 10 (1963), 13-15.
- ⁶ "La Francophonie comme culture," speech delivered at Université Laval, Quebec, Canada, 22 Sept. 1966. Published in Senghor, *Liberté 3: Négritude et civilisation de l'universel* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), p. 80.

- ⁷ *Drum Beat* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967).
- ⁸ *Song of Lawino* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1966).
- ⁹ *Un nègre à Paris* (Paris: présence Africaine, 1959), p. 203.
- ¹⁰ Wole Soyinka, "Declaration of African Writers," *Research in African Literatures*, 6, No. 1 (1975), 59.
- ¹¹ *The Writer in Modern Africa*, ed. Per Wastberg (New York: Africana, 1969), p. 31.
- ¹² "Why Foreign Names?" in *A Handbook of African Names* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents, 1976), p. 11.
- ¹³ "Named for Victoria, Queen of England," *New Letters*, 40, No. 1 (Oct. 1973), 17-18.
- ¹⁴ *Song of Lawino* (New York: Meridian, 1969), p. 132.
- ¹⁵ Wastberg, p. 18.
- ¹⁶ Wastberg, pp. 24; 26; 27; 30; 37.
- ¹⁷ Wastberg, p. 31.