

Robert M. Wren *Those Magical Years: The Making of Nigerian Literature at Ibadan: 1948-1966*. Washington, D. C. : Three Continents Press, 1990. pp. x, 147. \$14.00

Robert Wren mentions a conversation between the Nigerian critic Abiola Irele and the French Africanist Alain Richard concerning the need for a sociology of literature with attention to the material conditions that influenced and shaped the production of culture. In retrospect, this is what *Those Magical Years* attempts, although the unnecessarily convoluted structure of the book, moving backwards in time from Christopher Okigbo's death, a breathless, wide eyed "you are there" style, and many too many remarks about people telling unrepeatable gossip, result in a lack of focus, chronology, narrative or any generalized insights. Between 1982-1983 Wren interviewed some of those who taught or studied at the University of Ibadan between its foundation in 1948 and the start of the Nigerian-Biafran civil war in which Okigbo was killed. Wren asks why there was such an outburst of original creative writing at the time from Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, J. P. Clark and others associated with Ibadan. Although Wren keeps shrugging his shoulders and claiming that he does not understand more than when he began, much of the material for an answer can be found in the interviews.

Because of material scattered throughout the interviews, this is an essential, if frustrating, book for anyone interested in Nigerian literature or in comparing the rapid development of Commonwealth literature since 1950. I do not know whether Wren's thumb-in-mouth dumbness is just one pose in a book filled with his attempts to appear as if he were writing a popular scratch-my-head thriller, whether he really was puzzled and ignorant, or whether the manner is an unfortunate result of his death before completing a final version of the manuscript. The book certainly has its faults beginning with its undue reliance on J. P. Clark for much information, and the refusal of Wole Soyinka to be interviewed or have any association with the project. As Clark is notorious for his Clark-centered view of the world, his envy of Soyinka, and his defence of and involvement with the Nigerian Federal Government that imprisoned Soyinka during the Nigerian-Biafran civil war, Wren's reliance on Clark is bound to produce a narrative which others will find suspect. If this appears harsh, then read what Clark says about others here. European journalists in Lagos during the civil war learned to listen to Clark as a source for one point of view—at the time the only point of view officially allowed; Wren, who taught under Clark at the University of Lagos, appears to have thought that J. P.'s was the only horse's mouth. It is not just Soyinka who is filtered through Clark's eyes. Ulli Beier, O. R. Dathorne, Begum Hendrickse and others are either not given their due or mysteriously become villains. With Okigbo dead and Soyinka unwilling to co-operate, Wren might have interviewed Ulli

Beier, Christine Obumsele, Omolara Ogundipe, O. R. Dathorne, W. Feuser, Denis Williams, Arthur Drayton, W. H. Stevenson, John Ram-saran, Aig Higo, Gerald Moore, Peter Thomas, Paul Theroux and Ezekiel Mphahlele.

For someone so late on the scene there is this odd innocence about Wren as if he had to invent the wheel. *Those Magical Years* shows no signs, either in acknowledgments or influences, that Wren had read the sociology, scholarship, thoughts or memoirs of others who had written about the origins and history of Nigerian or African literature. There are useful articles, theses and books that touch on the subject by J. P. O'Flinn, W. H. Stevenson, Begum Hendrickse, Dapo Adelugba, Omolara Ogundipe, Bernth Lindfors, Bruce King, Jeanne Dingome, and others. The articles in volume 2 of *European-language writing in sub-saharan Africa*, edited by Albert Gérard (Akadémiai Kiado: Budapest, 1986), might be useful to read before reading Wren. They have information that is sometimes new to me, although I was there during six of Wren's magical years.

Writing the history of the new literatures should not be radically different from the history of other artistic movements, and it is frustrating that Wren has not approached his task with professionalism and method. If you were not already familiar with most of this story you probably could not understand it. There is not even a chronology of events and publications. Some comparative awareness would have helped. The Ibadan story is so similar to what happened at the same time at the University of the West Indies, Jamaica (also founded 1948), that it is instinctive to draw parallels. Other comparisons might be to the take off of modern Indian English poetry in Bombay after 1947, especially during Nissim Ezekiel's years at the University of Bombay, and even the *Tish* group at the University of British Columbia. Basically universities brought together talented, ambitious people, who were introduced to new ideas, techniques or styles, which were transformed into something more local; the universities also provided means of production, an audience, readership, critics and publicity.

Modern Nigerian literature did not begin at the University of Ibadan; arguably modernist Nigerian literature did. The context was decades of West Africa writing in English especially in local newspapers and magazines from the late Victorians onward. Nigerians had to learn how to write in older styles before the Ibadan generation could bring West African Anglophone literature into modernism. Whether one takes into account the Negritude of Senghor and Césaire or the take off of Ghanaian writing with Awoonor and Armah, the common element is some aspect of elite westernized "black" culture finding its expression in the style of modernism, a style that was taught at the University of Ibadan but not at the few existing colleges of higher education which earlier African writers attended. The one previous Nigerian whose writing showed awareness of modernism was Gabriel Okara. In many

ways, including being the first Nigerian to publish in *Black Orpheus*, Okara was the precursor of the Ibadan group; older by a decade, without the chance of a university education, he somehow found the path from Wordsworth to Langston Hughes to G. M. Hopkins to Senghor. It was because writers like Okara and intellectuals like Olu Bassir were already familiar with Negritude that Soyinka and Okigbo could dismiss it as passé, although Achebe and Clark were partly influenced by the ideas associated with it.

The story of how Nigerian literature reached the point of what economists call "take off" would need to include modern literature in local languages, especially D. O. Fagunwa's writings in Yoruba; popular Nigerian literature in English; cross cultural products by the semi-educated such as Amos Tutuola; Christian missionary literature; children's literature; the Arts Festivals of the 1950s; the British Council led writers clubs, publications and anthologies; the many South African refugee intellectuals; American foundation money; the influence of Negritude on *Black Orpheus* founded by Janheinz Jahn and Ulli Beier, the model of the Leeds University *Poetry and Audience* on the Banham-Clark University of Ibadan *Hom*. Basically the Nigerians wrote in relationship to the European literary tradition as taught them by the British. Achebe would find a model in Hardy and reply to what he felt were misrepresentations of Africa by Graham Greene and Joyce Cary. Even Tutuola made use of Bunyan, Swift and the way Fagunwa had Christianized West African tales.

A major influence, as shown in the interviews, was the excellent teaching in the elite schools, with their small classes, constant practice of reading and writing, and many school publications. The students had a traditional African culture marginally around them, but their actual, primary culture was Western, British, and from secondary school through university they shared in a British culture of school and university magazines, dance clubs, choirs, musical societies, drama groups. Their parents were school teachers, pastors, businessmen, professionals, a Westernized elite more likely to wear London-made clothing than have African masks on their walls. Their schools and families were mostly Christian and inter-tribal. They were not very political in the sense of being part of a struggle against colonialism. They were more likely to be politically disillusioned with the already notorious corruption of Nigerian politicians. The British had been trying to get Nigeria off its hands for the past decade, but disagreements among Nigerian politicians held up formal independence.

This was, however, the first generation to go to university in Nigeria (although Soyinka went to Leeds after doing a university entrance year at Ibadan and later used Ibadan as a base for research), and this was at a time when the rediscovery and assertion of African culture was politically and psychologically important. Those with talents were encouraged, and the high selectivity of the system at the time guaranteed they

had talent. The year before I arrived at the University of Ibadan there were four graduates in English. Then seven, then fourteen, then forty. A decade later there were forty universities each with over forty graduates in English. The creation of *Black Orpheus* or *The Horn* would not have been possible later, and the students would not have had the same elite education, years of practice writing and reading, the same familiarity with Western culture. The world was all before the first Ibadan graduates. A government permanent secretaryship? A post-graduate scholarship and a rapid professorship? A decade later, during a time of forty universities, semi-educated graduates would do anything for a job.

So what caused those magical years? At least fifty years evolution of Nigerian creative writing in English and acquisition of European literary forms; two decades of the highest and most selective and competitive standards of British education to prepare Nigerians for independence; the coming together of the children of the educated Westernized elite in such schools and in the first Nigerian university; the Oedipal relationship of the students to their Christian families; the social, psychological and intellectual context of Nigerian independence and West African decolonization; the presence of many sympathetic foreigners who eased the way towards re-Africanization and publication; the discovery of modernism as a style in which to assert the mixture of elitism, high accomplishment, intellectualization, biculturalism, alienation and Africanism — that was that generation's way of saying we are part of the modern world, we are the equal of whites (indeed more elite than most foreigners among us), this is our land, and this is a generation that will go beyond the tribalism, provincialism, corruption and Victorian Christianity of our elders. The civil war, mass education, the continuing disaster of self-rule, ironically even Africanization, meant that within a decade and a half the magical years were over.

The Ibadan years were similar to an artistic movement such as impressionism, expressionism, surrealism, action painting or bebop. An advance in craft and style was explored in various ways by a group of artists of approximately the same generation sharing somewhat similar views and backgrounds. Despite minor differences of opinion about the value of African cultural assertion and the role of the artist, Soyinka, Clark, Okigbo and Achebe were extremely serious about the technique of their art and generally liberal humanists in politics. In the Cold War they were on the side of the West. Any democratic "left" party, whether the French Socialists or the American Democrats, could have found room for them. As with cultural movements, there were associated artists in the other arts such as painting and music. Such movements can only thrive in cities or universities where a group of diverse talents can find the jobs, critics, audience and support they need, including places to meet. What made them — and similar explosions of creative energy in Commonwealth literature — different from other avant-garde movements was the infusion of the local, in this case a re-Africanization. At

first it was mostly a matter of theme, subject matter, and concern with the role of European languages in Africa, but soon the Ibadan group was asking how they could make use of oral literature, ritual, myth, belief, and of new popular forms that had developed at the intersection of the West and Africa.

Paradoxically, the radical, revolutionary, internationalist, even the anti-rationalist, primitive side of modernism seemed to welcome such an Africanization in which verbal rhythms replaced traditional English metrics, African rituals sat side by side with supposed Greek rituals in drama, and a Yoruba world view became an allegorical subtext like the myths that Eliot and Joyce had used to structure their major works. Lawrence and Yeats would not have thought the Ibadan group "primitive" enough; only Soyinka appears to have believed in the rediscovered African rituals. So cultural politics come into the story, but not in either the crude cultural nationalism Wren expected to find, or even in a more "mediated" sophisticated politics of representation. Rather, an outdated provincial European artistic tradition in exile updated itself, and became part of the modern world, while indigenizing itself as it absorbed and learned how to use native arts and culture, in the process transforming itself into a self-generating local tradition. At the end of the day nothing specifically Nigerian seems essential to Nigerian English literature—any more than anything is essentially American in American literature—except that it be written by a Nigerian. Those magical years made such freedom possible.

BRUCE KING

Trinh T. Minh-ha. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*. London: Routledge, 1991. pp. ix, 251. \$45.00; \$14.95 pb.

Trinh T. Minh-ha is one of the foremost theorists of decolonization currently working in the area of cross-cultural identity. A leading "documentary" filmmaker, Trinh supplements her creative work with writings that clarify and expand upon the issues raised by her films. In fact, one of her major concerns is to deconstruct the binary opposition between art and criticism. Relentlessly, in this her second book of essays (following the much acclaimed *Woman, Native, Other*), she challenges the West's tendency to compartmentalize human experience, proposing instead the notion of a fluid subjectivity—one that can move freely across established boundaries and adopt various, even contradictory, roles. She describes her ideal subject as a "permanent sojourner" who continually displaces identity and introduces difference (24), not so much an individual as a text that is always provisional and transitional.

Grounded in French post-structuralist thought (particularly Barthes and Cixous but also Walter Benjamin), these essays nonetheless repeat this thought with a difference, superimposing upon it an Eastern sensi-