

NIGERIAN LITERATURE

NIGERIAN LITERATURE  
IN ENGLISH;  
AN INTRODUCTORY SURVEY.

BY  
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## PREFACE

As a conference on Commonwealth Literature was beginning at the University of Leeds in September, 1964, Professor A. N. Jeffares, the director of the conference, wrote an article for the Yorkshire Post and in it made the following remarks:

This conference . . . concentrates upon a vast reservoir of human knowledge, ideas, aspirations and experience; upon a source of energy as well as of dreams. Literature shapes dreams, but it also shapes education, it stimulates thinking. How an African thinks tomorrow, for example, may well be the result of what he reads today . . . An African finds himself by reading what his own authors say about Africa. His situation is, in part, reflected or interpreted by his author . . . The new writer can bring to his overseas readers, wherever they may be in the Commonwealth, in the centre or on the perimeter, his own interpretation of life, his new development of the English language . . . his new nuances, his new style. And he needs, inevitably, new and sympathetic understanding.

There is a good deal of wisdom in these remarks, particularly when Professor Jeffares observes that an African "finds himself by reading what his own author says about Africa." When, for instance, classes of young Nigerian students heard for the first time readings from Chinua Achebe's

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<sup>I</sup>  
The Yorkshire Post, September 10th., 1964. Quoted in the Newsletter of the Conference on British Commonwealth Literature, (Texas, Nov. 1964), p.3.

No Longer at Ease, they responded with immediate and noisy enthusiasm.<sup>1</sup> The discovery was marked alternately by loud cries of astonishment and deep sighs of approval. It was hard for them to believe that a writer could know them so well, quote their proverbs or make the same jokes about the white man. They had, of course, responded warmly to the wisdom of Shakespeare and George Orwell, authors on their literature syllabus; but the impact of neither author had been nearly so great as that of Nigeria's own Chinua Achebe.

It is, surely, also true to say that the new writer can bring to his overseas readers his own special interpretation of life, particularly the life of his own people. Thus, Camara Laye's African Child or Cyprian Ekwensi's Burning Grass can give us a more authentic account of African life, can speak more eloquently of its dignity and beauty,<sup>2</sup> than a dozen Mungo Parks, Robert Browns or Graham Greenes. Hitherto, for the western world, Africa and its people have only been reported; always the white author, sympathetic or

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<sup>1</sup> This was the writer's personal experience with groups of students in a Nigerian Training College for Teachers, 1961-1963.

<sup>2</sup> The nineteenth century anthropologist, author of a monumental study, Races of Mankind.

<sup>3</sup> Graham Greene's understanding of Africa is, of course, very deep. His Heart of the Matter, for instance, set in Sierra Leone, is described by the hero of No Longer at Ease as the most sensible novel on West Africa yet written by a European.

hostile, learned or ignorant, has stood between the reader and his subjects. Now the subjects themselves are coming to the front of the stage and speaking about themselves. In the interests of justice alone, they deserve a sympathetic hearing; indeed, it may even be to our advantage to give them this, for when a vast continent suddenly finds its voice, the chances are that eventually some rare and important things will be heard.

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## INTRODUCTION

The corpus of African literature is already very large and growing rapidly. It includes works written in English, French, Portuguese and Spanish as well as in an untold number of vernaculars. This dissertation, however, hopes to do justice to only a small but important fraction of the whole, namely the literature in English that has so far appeared in the Republic of Nigeria. And even here, there is so much literary activity that only a limited survey can be attempted. It seemed prudent, therefore, to introduce but two novelists, Amos Tutuola and Chinua Achebe, and three poets, Mabel Segun, Wole Soyinka and Gabriel Okara. These authors have not been chosen strictly on the basis of merit or output. With the exception of Chinua Achebe (who is certainly the finest novelist to emerge so far), they have been included because they happen to conveniently illustrate a feature common to the whole group or because, like Tutuola, they are significant in some special way.

A note on Négritude has been included, partly because its importance on the West African literary scene seems to demand it and more especially because it is a way of illustrating one direction in which the Nigerian writers have definitely decided not to move. Finally, a chapter on the market writings



of Onitsha is offered for it is often illuminating to explore that narrow strip of territory where literature meets sociology and it is also important, surely, to know what the average Nigerian is doing with his newly-acquired literacy. The writings, in any case, have an importance beyond this, for in their crude way they are forcing on talent and creating an audience for the republic's more reputable literature.

When approaching African literature the reader should take care to avoid the pitfall revealed by Robie Macauley, editor of the Kenyon Review, when he said that Europeans invariably enter on the subject of African writing "with such diffidence and charity that even the most inept African writer can be made out as an interesting example of something-or-other." This attitude, of course, with its concern for polite deceit, just will not do. It is, in any case, just as quickly detected by contemporary Africans as it was by that curious eighteenth century poet Stephen Duck<sup>1</sup> who, upon receiving fulsome praise for his poems from a group of benefactors, is quoted by Spence as retorting, "Gentlemen indeed . . . might like 'em because they were made by a poor Fellow in a Barn; but he knew, as well as anybody, that they were not really good in themselves."<sup>1</sup> African literature needs, therefore - and its authors repeatedly demand - a

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Duck, Poems on Several Occasions. Introductory letter by Joseph Spence.

criticism that is honest; but in these early days, surely, it deserves a species of criticism which, while remaining honest, seeks to promote growth and direction; for youngest flowers are those most easily trampled and destroyed.

## BEGINNINGS: NEGRITUDE AND INTERNAL INFLUENCES

Some of the reasons why there has been a remarkable upsurge of creative writing in Nigeria during the past decade are not hard to discover. In the mid-fifties the tide of nationalism was beginning to flow very strongly. It pulled together a nation of bewildering tribal groupings and began to search for tokens of national pride and dignity. The movement quickly found its voice for, by this time, education was already sufficiently widespread to enable many of its young supporters to eloquently express themselves. Independence from Britain was finally achieved in 1960, and since then heady draughts of freedom have given way to a self-confidence that is both mature and realistic. Cultural emancipation, it seems, has gone hand in hand with political emancipation. Hence the present situation, where, in a country whose oral traditions and vernaculars are still firmly entrenched, educated writers are producing a growing body of literature in English and aiming it at a world-wide audience.

Although serious writing began in Nigeria only ten years ago, further along the coast of West Africa, in Guinea and Senegal, French-speaking poets had been active since 1937. These poets, men like Léopold Sédar Senghor, David Diop and Léon Damas, were fervent disciples of Négritude. Created in

its present form largely by Senghor and Aimé Césaire of Martinique, Négritude developed as a violently emotional reaction against European culture by those negroes whom French colonialism had assimilated into it. The poets loudly vaunt their blackness, heap praise upon everything that is African, their ancestors, ritual and the traditional way of life. Aimé Césaire shouts:

Hurray for those who never invented anything  
 for those who never explored anything  
 for those who never conquered anything  
 hurray for joy<sup>1</sup>  
 hurray for love.

and then

My négritude is no deaf stone that reflects  
 the noise of the day  
 My négritude is no spot on the dead eye of  
 the earth  
 My négritude is no tower and no cathedral  
 It dives into the red flesh of the soil  
 It dives into the glowing flesh of the sky  
 Piercing the weight of oppression with its  
 erect patience.<sup>2</sup>

While celebrating their negro-ness, the poets pour scorn on western civilisation, on its artificiality and its lack of warm human values. Writing of New York, Senghor says:

Nights of insomnia or nights of Manhattan!  
 So agitated by flickering lights, while motor  
 car horns howl of empty hours  
 And while dark waters carry away hygienic  
 loves like rivers

<sup>1</sup> Aimé Césaire, "Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal,"  
 quoted by Gerald Moore, Seven African Writers (London),

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. viii.

<sup>3</sup> Senghor's "New York," quoted by Ezekiel Mphahlele,  
The African Image, (New York), 1962, p. 26.

flooded with the corpses of children. <sup>1</sup>

Césaire, for his part, asks us to:

Listen to the white world  
how their defeats sound in their victories. <sup>2</sup>

and Léon Damas confesses:

I feel ridiculous  
in their shoes in their dinner jackets,  
in their stiff shirts, their paper collars,  
with their monocles and their bowler hats  
I feel ridiculous. <sup>3</sup>

Though Négritude has often led to a hysterical kind of romanticism, it has had a profound effect on the negro world at large and particularly on the writers of the former French African colonies. The German critic Janheinz Jahn has stressed its importance in his pamphlet "Approaches to African Literature."

Négritude was liberation; it freed African authors from European patterns of writing. Négritude became a confession of Africa, of African thinking, African way of life. Africa often despised as inferior, got its value back and its honour, adopting and praising the ways of traditional African thinking. By Négritude Africa was intellectually freed. <sup>4</sup>

What is significant for our survey, however, is that

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- <sup>1</sup> Ezekiel Mphahlele, The African Image, (New York, 1962), p.26.
  - <sup>2</sup> Gerald Moore, Seven African Writers, (London, 1962), p.xv.
  - <sup>3</sup> Ezekiel Mphahlele, The African Image, p.27.
  - <sup>4</sup> Janheinz Jahn and John Ramsaran, Approaches to African Literature, (Ibadan, 1959).

the writers of English-speaking West Africa have reacted strongly against the spirit of Négritude. Far from being characterised by unrestrained emotionalism, their writing is marked by a curious lack of passion, an evenness of tone and a mature cool-headedness. The young Nigerian author Wole Soyinka feels that the apostles of Négritude are too self-consciously African. "The duiker," he says, "will not paint 'duiker' on his beautiful back to proclaim his duiker-itude; you'll know him by his elegant leap. The less self-conscious the African is, and the more innately his individual qualities appear in his writings, the more seriously he will be taken as an artist of exciting dignity." "Emphasising his point more firmly, Soyinka even dares to assert that Senghor seems artistically expatriate and goes on to say that he and poets like him" are a definite retrogressive, pseudo-romantic influence on a healthy development of West African writing. The African Renaissance is not an easy refuge in literary nationalism, which anyway, is self-indulgence and no substitute for art."<sup>1</sup>

It is not easy to determine why the English-speaking states should be stirred into literary activity so long after the French territories. Educational opportunities were certainly not inferior nor was there an unequal reservoir of talent. One might begin, perhaps, by observing

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<sup>1</sup>Ezekiel Mphahlele, "Négritude", Encounter, March, 1961.

that French West Africa was fortunate to have in Senghor a man distinguished both as statesman and poet. Literary endeavour, therefore, was quickly given a stamp of respectability and appeared as a cause worth espousing. In British West Africa, on the other hand, politicians tended to be politicians and, as a result, creative writing could not be easily identified with political eminence and high government office.

Some may be tempted to speculate that there was perhaps a hidden element in Gallic colonialism, and absent from the English, that fostered a flowering of the arts; after all, it is not unusual to hear people observing that the French are infinitely more cultured than the British. The chief argument against this seems to be that if Senghor's embracing of Négritude was responsible for the quickening of literary activity in French West Africa - and this seems to be valid assumption - then it must be pointed out that although he encountered the idea of Négritude in France, it had been imported there by Aimé Césaire from the Caribbean.

There were, of course, marked differences between the two brands of colonialism and one of the more important of them was the determination on the part of France to produce in her African territories black Frenchmen - people whose cast of mind, language and attitudes would be identical with those found in the mother country. A splendid intellectual empire was envisaged whose shining hub was

Paris and the Académie.<sup>1</sup> Though the process of assimilation was prosecuted with zeal and efficiency, a suspicion took root among French Africans that their colour was only tolerated because they had assumed the trappings and language of French civilisation. Hence the sudden gesture of defiance and the heartfelt yearning for roots from which assimilation had effectively cut them off:

Do they really dare to treat me as white  
while I aspire to be nothing but negro  
and while they are looting my Africa?<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, in British West Africa, there was no such cultural domination to react against. The British concept of empire was certainly not an intellectual one, so that, under a fairly permissive rule, Africans were left as Africans, secure in their own cultural habitat. Nor did the French writers make any significant impression on their English-speaking neighbours, for translations were not available and a knowledge of French, as a third language, could hardly be widespread in countries where even now complete fluency in two languages is very rare. In any case, as the above remarks imply, it is extremely doubtful if Négritude would have made much impact on Nigerian writers - and thus perhaps

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<sup>1</sup>Salvador De Madariaga has written an excellent essay on this subject, entitled "Inglaterra, Francia, España," Antología De Ensayos Espanoles, (Boston), 1936, p. 168. In it he writes: "la historia de la política extranjera de Francia manifieste una tendencia a organizar el mundo en forma de sistema solar con París por centro y sol."

<sup>2</sup>Seven African Writers, p. xiv.



hastened a literary upsurge - since cultural conditions were so utterly different.

Matthew Arnold frequently complained that the "atmosphere" of his own period was not conducive to the creation of great works of literature and he looked back with nostalgia to the era of Elizabeth when, it seemed, the atmosphere was ideally the right one. Perhaps we too easily blame the spirit of an age in this way, thus lifting the blame from individuals and places of learning. Perhaps indeed Arnold was seeking to excuse his own curious lack of vigour, which prevented him from reaching really great literary heights. Conversely, we are sometimes too willing to ascribe an author's greatness to the age in which he lived and reluctant to give credit to the influence of people and places. These thoughts are offered because in the case of Nigerian literature it seems abundantly clear that the spurt of literary activity that has marked the past decade can be traced almost entirely to the University of Ibadan and a group of dedicated scholars attached to it. The Ibadan writers include the novelists Achebe and Nwankwo, the dramatist Soyinka and the poets Segun, Echeruo, Imoukhuede, Pepper Clark and Okigbo. The Department of English seems to have given its students strong encouragement, yet without offering formal courses in creative writing;

writing; Nkem Nwankwo, whose novel Danda has just been published by André Deutsch, remarks that he spent his time there "writing voraciously." Unlike the Negritude writers who received their university training in Paris, the Ibadan writers were able to get their training in an essentially African milieu. While studying the literary traditions of England and improving their ability to make the language work, they were not cut off from the source of their experience and inspiration. Had their training taken place overseas, the whole tone and pace of Nigerian literature would be different: as it is, their African education seems to be responsible for what Ezekiel Mphahlele calls this writing's "overall steady pace and sedate mood,"<sup>1</sup> so different from the wild clamour of Negritude and the panting rhythms of South Africa.

Since the mid-fifties, Ibadan has become increasingly a centre of literary activity. The Department of English has drawn up a strong syllabus in African literature under the direction of the West Indian novelist and critic O. R. Dathorne.<sup>2</sup> The University itself publishes a journal of general cultural interest and the student body is responsible for Horn, a thriving poetry magazine established in his undergraduate days

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<sup>1</sup>E. Mphahlele, The African Image, (New York, 1962), p. 193.

<sup>2</sup>Mr. Dathorne writes prolifically on African literature, has published two novels and a number of poems. At present he is Reviews Editor for Black Orpheus.

by the poet and dramatist John Pepper Clark. The founder members of the Ibadan group have since spent periods overseas, in Europe, America and the West Indies; and they have returned, with their stock of experience broadened and deepened, to carry forth a process of valuable enrichment in and around Ibadan, the city one of them describes as a

running splash of rust  
and gold-flung and scattered  
among seven hills like broken  
china in the sun.<sup>1</sup>

Pepper Clark spent a year at Princeton, and on his return, with a sensibility undoubtedly modified, published America, Their America.<sup>2</sup> Wole Soyinka studied at Leeds and then worked at the Royal Court Theatre, London, where one of his own plays was produced. He took back to Ibadan a markedly developed gift of irony, a sophisticated prose style and many new ideas for stimulating Nigerian drama.

An important development at Ibadan has been the establishing of Mbari Writers and Artists Club. An imaginative venture, praise for this must go to the German Scholar Ulli Beier, who has worked unsparingly in the cause of African culture for the past fifteen years. It was largely at his

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<sup>1</sup>Ulli Beier and Gerald Moore, Modern Poetry from Africa, (Penguin, 1963) p. 89.

<sup>2</sup>John P. Clark, America. Their America, (London, 1964) Clark was not happy in America. O. R. Dathorne, in the Bulletin of the Association for African Literature, (Freetown, 1964), p. 6, dismisses this work as "a long moan with bits of 'verse' thrown in."

instigation also that the magazine Black Orpheus was first produced, in 1957, and which, along with "Présence Africaine" (Paris 1947), has rapidly established itself as the world's most influential journal of African and Afro-American literature. In the pages of Black Orpheus, Nigerian writers and, of course, writers from across the continent, find an ideal outlet for their poetry, short stories, book reviews and literary experiments. In addition to Black Orpheus, Mbari now has its own publishing house, thus helping to fulfil an important and long-felt need.<sup>1</sup> Already Mbari has published the poetry of Christopher Okigbo and J. P. Clark, the plays of Soyinka, the fiction of the South African Alex La Guma and a variety of books on African artists and sculptors. Ibadan, then, is alive with activity. As the largest city of black Africa, it seems appropriate that it should be rapidly developing into the literary capital of the continent.

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<sup>1</sup>The problems of the African writer trying to publish abroad were widely discussed at an African Writers' Conference held at Makerere University College, Uganda, in 1962. Extracts from the discussion appeared in the African Journal Transition for 30th. July, 1962, published in Kampala.

### SOME NIGERIAN POETS

There are at present sufficient poets working in Nigeria for the editors of Modern Poetry from Africa to write, "the centre of poetic activity seems to have shifted from Senegal-Paris to Nigeria, where the last five years have seen a remarkable upsurge."<sup>1</sup> The truth of this is underlined in the anthology itself where, of thirty-one poets representing every major linguistic division of the continent, no less than eight are Nigerian. The same editors also offer some familiar observations on the poets and the quality of their works:

"having grown up and been educated in a purely African environment, their work is extraordinarily free from slogans or stereotypes . . . each has compounded a strongly individual voice."<sup>2</sup>

The slogans referred to here, so noticeably absent from Nigerian verse, are those daubed on the proud banners of Negritude. Certainly, the voice of racial protest is raised from time to time, so too a certain bitterness at past grievances; but among Nigerian writers there is no typical group response on these or any other issues, for to a man they are fiercely independent,

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<sup>1</sup>Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier, Modern Poetry from Africa (Penguin, 1963,) p. 24.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

each anxious to record his own experience and solve his own artistic problems.<sup>1</sup> Compare, for example, a stock outburst from a Négritude poet with a sample of the more personal poetry of Nigeria. The first piece is taken from "Pigments" by Léon Damas, and the second is called "Streamside Exchange" by John Pepper Clark:

(1) My hatred thrived on the margin of culture  
 the margin of theories the margin of idle talk  
 with which they stuffed me since birth  
 even though all in me aspired to be Negro  
 while they ransack my Africa

(2)  
 Child: River bird, river bird,  
 Sitting all day long  
 On hook over grass,  
 River bird, river bird,  
 Sing to me a song  
 Of all that pass  
 And say,  
 Will mother come back today?

Bird: You cannot know  
 And should not bother;  
 Tide and market come and go  
 And so shall your mother <sup>2</sup>

Admittedly, for purposes of comparison, the poems are at extremes; but the juxtaposition is not entirely worthless, for the Clark poem displays a typical freedom from bitterness and spite. The poet can concentrate on his subject without

<sup>1</sup> Mphahlele argues that Gabriel Okara has written some verse in the spirit of Négritude, citing the poem "You Laughed and Laughed" as an example. (See The African Image, p. 194) This dissertation, however, discusses poems of Okara which place the poet at a good distance from the main trends of Négritude.

<sup>2</sup> J. P. Clark, Poems, (Mbari, Ibadan), 1962, p. 31.

striking a racial pose or even feeling it necessary to say the scene is set in Africa. What is more, Clark's delicate imaging of this rural incident is a useful example of a contentment among most Nigerian poets to devote themselves to rendering, as beautifully as possible, their private response to the world around them. They are able, thus, to listen more intently to what Mphahlele has called the "pastoral symphonies" of the earth.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere, for instance, Clark celebrates with passion the arrival of the first rains of the season after long months of drought:

Rain comes . . .  
 After long surcease in desert  
 Rain comes,  
 Hot-breathing, alert  
 and swift to thunder-rolls and claps  
 With-kestrel-together-leaf flaps.  
 And earth all the while waiting, waiting inert,  
 Fallow and burdened with stone,  
 Shudders to her rump,  
 Tingles to the trump  
 Of the long-missed one.  
 Now with more than tongue can tell  
 Thrusts he strokes her, swamps her,  
 Enters all of him beyond her fell,  
 Till in the calm and cool after  
 All alone, earth yawns, lingers her stay,  
 Swollen already with the life to break at day.<sup>2</sup>

This is a carefully organised piece, at times unfortunate in its rhymes, but moving fairly smoothly through the various phases of a tropical storm; the desert dryness is followed

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<sup>1</sup>Frances Ademola, Reflections, (Lagos, 1962) p. 10.

<sup>2</sup>"The Year's First Rain," Poems p. 29.

by insufferable humidity, mighty winds, the deluge, and finally a world of coolness and restored calm. There seems to be some kind of attempt also to gradually fill out the lines - just as the downpour will fill the earth - until the last, and longest, line is reached, where the earth, drenched with rain and full with a new season's growth, lies "Swollen already with the life to break at day." That the poet should choose to figuratively render the meeting of storm and earth as a kind of elemental sexual union seems especially appropriate for a poem celebrating the return of life and growth to a dry and barren world.

When themes akin to Négritude appear, Nigerian poets are apt to react in a most unorthodox manner. For Mabel Segun, Nigeria's problem is not one of racial conflict at all; rather it is the agonising choice that must soon be made between two cultures - the traditional African or the modern western. She outlines her problem in a splendidly blunt poetic statement called "Conflict."

Here we stand  
 infants overblown,  
 poised between two civilisations,  
 finding the balance irksome,  
 itching for something to happen,  
 to tip us one way or the other,  
 groping in the dark for a helping hand  
 and finding none.  
 I'm tired, O my God, I'm tired,  
 I'm tired of hanging in the middle way -  
 but where can I go?<sup>1</sup>

In spite of a slight strain of hysteria here, a real situation

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<sup>1</sup>Frances Ademola, Reflections, (Lagos) 1962, p. 65



is dramatised with sincerity and force. Having swept away the evils of colonialism, the tide of national feeling has largely spent itself. In its wake we find a post-independence era marked, not surprisingly, by feelings of confusion and doubt. Euphoria has given way to disappointment, a sense of anti-climax and what can only be described as a type of cultural schizophrenia. Freedom was not expected to present a choice so painful that the nation would be "poised between two civilisations." And the poet believes the people are as yet merely "infants overblown," insufficiently mature to make a decision of such magnitude; and yet a choice must be made. This, then, is the dilemma that lies at the heart of Nigeria's social and cultural life. From it stems a number of problems, including the complex struggle between old and new which, as we shall see, the novelist Chinua Achebe explores more fully in No Longer at Ease. Miss Segun's closing, "But when can I go?" underlines the urgency of the problem, its existence here and now; it is a question, however, which no Nigerian writer has so far felt confident enough to answer.<sup>1</sup>

The process of realistically portraying the contemporary African scene is continued in Miss Segun's poem, "Corruption." In this piece, however, she advances a step

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<sup>1</sup>At the political level, and outside Nigeria, Dr. Nkrumah of Ghana believes in the possibility of a modern industrialised African state that preserves the traditional culture of the people.

further from the conventional position of Négritude by fiercely rebuking not the white colonialists but her own people who, with their selfish greed, have blighted the fair promise of independence.

The land was flowing with milk and honey  
 And bathed in the light of God's good Grace;  
 The itching palm, the greedy heart,  
 The meaning look that demands in secret,  
 Have curled the milk and saddened the honey  
 And turned the land to desolation

The preacher's voice is here, indignant, magisterial and at times bitterly cynical; the style, appropriately, is vigorous, rich in Biblical allusion and images of decay.

The leaves are blowing about on the land  
 And the air is filled with a smell of rot,  
 And wriggling forms are dancing about  
 On this dunghill that was our land.  
 Come join our merry dancing throng  
 It is the feast of maggots;  
 There's plenty to eat and plenty to drink  
 Out of the filth of greed.

The nation is suffering from a spiritual sickness. "There's plenty to eat and plenty to drink" for those in positions of power who are prepared to cheat, bribe and indulge themselves.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile the poor remain poor. According to the poet, the future offers little hope of a cure and her despair is uppermost in what is the central, and most brutal, image of the poem - a house smitten by plague, its occupants dead or dying and a lonely child sitting weeping at the door, puzzled

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<sup>1</sup>Frances Ademola, Reflections, (Lagos, 1962,) p. 66.

<sup>2</sup>John Ekwere also faces up to the reality of this situation in his brief poem, "Rejoinder," Reflections, p. 68

No more now the foreign hawks  
 On alien chickens prey  
 But we on us!

by the onset of disaster and powerless to begin to tackle it:

I see a household stricken by sin--  
 Five men are dead another dying.  
 A little child sits by the door,  
 lone and forlorn  
 Weeping at a desolation he cannot  
 understand,  
 Faced with a situation he cannot  
 resolve.  
 And who shall bury the stricken  
 dead?  
 Are there not five good men in Sodom,  
 Are there not five in Gomorrah  
 To bury the swollen dead?  
 The yellow leaves are gammolling  
 around--  
 It is the dance of death  
 And who shall clear the land of  
 filth?  
 Can the little child use the rake yet?  
 Where could he bury the stricken dead?  
 Under the dead leaves, under the dead  
 leaves!

In keeping with the revivalist pose she has struck, Miss Segun brings the poem to a climax with a deliberate adaptation of a Biblical quotation and an image of the "darkling plain" variety:

The leaves are rotting, the bodies are  
 rotting  
 Filth to filth, triumphant putrefaction  
 Under a black, unsmiling sky.

.....

Perhaps the most sophisticated writer of the Ibadan group, Wole Soyinka is a good craftsman in both prose and verse; though in both forms his style suffers too frequently from excercises in verbal acrobatics, as though he is anxious the reader should not miss his, admittedly high, degree of sophistication. In one sense, however, he must be set aside from his fellow writers for, as Mphahlele says, Soyinka can

laugh in a way no other West African of British influence can - with the written word."<sup>1</sup> An acutely sensitive person, Soyinka might well have become a disciple of Negritude, a Nigerian Léon Damas perhaps, if he had spent his undergraduate days overseas. In the event, when he did proceed to England and gain first hand experience of the negro's problems in a white society, he was able to respond to them in a mature way, using as his weapons gentle sarcasm, delicate irony and rumbustious laughter. At least this<sup>is</sup> what one gathers from 'Telephone Conversation', his humorous account in verse of an incident in London:

The price seemed reasonable, location  
Indifferent. The landlady swore she lived  
Off premises. Nothing remained  
But self-confession. 'Madam,' I warned,  
'I hate a wasted journey--I am African'  
Silence. Silenced transmission of  
Pressurised good breeding. Voice, when it  
came,  
Lipstick--coated, long gold-rolled  
Cigarette-holder pipped. Caught I was,  
fouly.

'HOW DARK' . . . I had not misheard . . .  
ARE YOU LIGHT

'OR VERY DARK?' Button B. Button A. Stench  
Of rancid breath of public hide-and-speak.  
Red booth. Red pillar-box. Red double-tiered  
Omnibus squelching tar. It was real! Shamed  
By ill-mannered silence, surrender  
Pushed dumbfoundment to beg simplification.  
Considerate she was, varying the emphasis--

'ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?' Revelation  
came.

'You mean - like plain or milk chocolate?'  
Her assent was clinical, crushing in its light  
Impersonality. Rapidly, wave--length adjusted,  
I chose, 'West African sepia'---and as an after-  
thought,

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<sup>1</sup>Ezekiel Mphahlele, The African Image, (New York, 1962,) p. 197.

'Down in my passport.' Silence for Spectroscopic  
 Flight of fancy, till truthfulness clanged her  
 accent  
 Hard on the mouthpiece 'WHAT'S THAT?', conceding,  
 'DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT IS.' 'Like brunette.'  
 'THAT'S DARK, ISN'T IT?' 'Not altogether.  
 Facially, I am brunette, but madam, you  
 should see  
 The rest of me. Palm of my hand, soles of my  
 feet  
 Are a peroxide blonde,. Friction, caused--  
 Foolishly madam--by sitting down, has turned  
 My bottom raven black--One moment madam!--  
 sensing  
 Her receiver rearing on the thunderclap  
 About my ears--"Madam," I pleaded, 'Wouldn't  
 you rather  
 See for yourself?'<sup>1</sup>

This is clearly light satire, but it illustrates some of the main features of Soyinka's style. It is incisive and clipped in the modern manner, encompassing a fine range of tones and displaying contempt for such minutiae of language as definite or indefinite articles and possessive pronouns. A good deal of Soyinka's latest work is not yet available, but reports from Ibadan suggest that his writing has entered upon a new and darker phase.

. . . . .

The Ibadan group by no means completely dominate the literary scene in Nigeria, for the most promising poet, Gabriel Okara, is not a member of their ranks. Okara belongs to the Ijew tribe of the Niger Delta and at 45 he is, after Tutuola, the oldest of the Nigerian writers. He did not receive a University education but trained as a book-binder

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<sup>1</sup>John Reed and Clive Wake, A Book of African Verse, (London, 1964,) p. 81

prior to taking up a post with the Government of Eastern Nigeria. Mbari has been slow to publish a collection of his verse; but several poems have appeared in Black Orpheus, in a variety of recent African anthologies and in journals in Britain, Sweden, West Germany, Italy and the United States.

The superior quality of Okara's work seems to lie partly in its overall intensity of mood. Here is a committed poet, utterly sincere in all he brings to the poet's task and anxious to persist in cultivating his poetic sensibility. In sophistication he may well be surpassed by Soyinka; in the art of blunt rhetoric he would willingly yield place to Miss Segun; and in output he is certainly surpassed by Pepper Clark and Okigbo. Yet in none of these poets' work can there be found so much richness of soul, so much evidence of an inner life and so constant a preoccupation with the basic themes of life and death. Okara gives us no gesture of historical protest, no homilies, no advice, but simply a faithful and beautifully controlled account of his individual experience. Less confident than his fellow poets, a fear of failure seems to haunt him; and he is afflicted by a deep-going melancholia, which, however, the sincerity of his verse suggests as being genuine and not merely some borrowing from nineteenth-century romanticism. It is no coincidence that Dylan Thomas has, to some extent, influenced him, for in a way he shares with Thomas the Celtic colour of soul, the fine sensitivity and large resources of sadness, yet without the Celtic sense

of humour.<sup>1</sup> The poem "To Paveba" charts a fairly characteristic movement in Okara's verse from hope through partial joy to sober reality and ultimate disillusionment:

When young fingers stir  
 the fire smouldering in my inside  
 the dead weight of dead years roll  
 crashing to the ground  
 and the fire begins to flame anew

The fire begins to flame anew  
 devouring the debris of years--  
 the dry harmattan-sucked trees,  
 the dry tearless faces  
 smiling weightless smiles like breath  
 that do not touch the ground.

The fire begins to flame anew  
 and I laugh and shout to the eyes  
 of the sky on the back of a fish  
 and I stand on the wayside  
 smiling the smile of budding trees  
 at men and women whose insides  
 are filled with ashes who  
 tell me, "We once had our flaming fire."

Then I remember my vow.  
 I remember my vow not to let  
 my fire flame any more. And the dead  
 years rise creaking from the ground  
 and file slowly into my inside  
 and shyly push aside the young fingers  
 and smother the devouring flame.

And as before the fire smoulders in water,  
 continually smouldering beneath  
 the ashes with things I dare not tell  
 erupting from the hackneyed lore

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<sup>1</sup>Seeking out influences in any detailed way is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Suffice it to say that there seem to be strong points of similarity between Thomas's "Before I knocked" and Okara's "Were I to Choose."

of the beginning. For they die in the  
 telling.  
 So let them be. Let them smoulder.  
 Let them smoulder in the living fire  
 beneath the ashes.

The occasional strangeness of the diction here owes its presence to Okara's habit of writing his work first in his native Ijaw and then translating it into English; such expressions as "the eye of the sky." "weightless smiles," and the frequent references to "inside" stem from this. The poet is keen for fresh exploration of language; keen also, perhaps, to refute a charge heard occasionally that Nigerian writing is only a "minor appendage in the main stream of European literature."<sup>1</sup>

Okara likes to work with symbols, which he uses as signposts to the basic ideas his poem is investigating. Hence in "To Pavabe" the symbol of fire: "young fingers stir the fire smouldering in my inside," "the fire begins to flame anew," "the fire smoulders in water." Clearly this represents warmth, vitality, growth, expectancy and elation. When the fire is stirred up it leads to the sudden gushing abandon of the third stanza:

and I laugh and shout to the eye  
 of the sky on the back of a fish  
 of

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<sup>1</sup>The charge was made specifically against Pepper Clark, Okigbo and Wole Soyinka by the Nigerian Obiajunwa Wali writing in Transition (Kampala) vol. 2, No. 5.



and I stand on the wayside  
smiling the smile of budding trees.

Sharply opposed to this is the symbol of the ashes, representing death, despair, decay: "men and women whose insides are filled with ashes," "fire . . . continually smouldering beneath the ashes." Strongly associated with this symbol is the notion of dryness, the dryness of infertility, and of death. Hence "the dry harmattan-sucked trees," "the debris of years," "the dry tearless faces," "the dead weight of years roll crashing to the ground." The symbols neatly balance each other, satisfying an almost Augustan desire in Okara to achieve symmetry by a balance of opposing forces.

Presumably, the poet momentarily warns to professions of love from a young lady--or allows himself to watch enthusiastically the affection shown each other by a pair of young lovers--and then must remind himself that human love is, after all, finite, just like human life; it will lead inevitable to the coldness of the grave. The situation is rendered most imaginatively by Okara's choice of an important paradox; for while it is in the nature of fire to give warmth and for its warmth to promote growth, so too is it in the nature of fire to consume, to kill and destroy, a revelation that comes speedily to the poet after the old men and women have warned, "We once had our flaming fire."

The final couplet contains an unsatisfactory solution

and the poet offers it in a mood of brooding resignation:

So let them be. Let them smoulder.  
Let them smoulder in the living fire  
beneath the ashes.

It is thematically, and therefore artistically, appropriate that the final line should bring the two symbols together since there is, after all, the closest possible relationship between fire and ashes. So too in life, Okara seems to say, periods of happiness, no matter how intense, can only lead to death.

A visit to America added a further dimension to Okara's work because it allowed him to respond to an entirely new environment and set of experiences. Indeed in "The Snow Flakes Sail Gently Down," (the poet's reaction to a snow scene) there is to be found some of Okara's most beautiful writing. Constructed around a picture of falling snow that is balanced by a dream of home, the poem is a strange mixture of elements tropical and northern. Its diction captures the quiet gentleness of falling snow, sibilants and controlled alliteration combining to create an effect of great smoothness:

The snow flakes sail gently  
down from the misty eye of the sky  
and fall lightly lightly on the  
winter-weary elms. And the branches.  
winter-stripped and nude, slowly  
with the weight of weightless snow  
bow like grief-stricken mourners  
as white funeral cloth is slowly  
unrolled over deathless earth.  
And dead sleep stealthily from the

heater rose and closed my eyes with  
the touch of silk cotton on water falling.<sup>I</sup>

As in "To Faveba" Okara's success in this poem owes much to a balance of opposing elements; there is here, once again, a concern with the ideas of life and death - ideas providing the infra-structure for what is, on the surface, a poem dealing with Nature. Thus, in the first stanza, the landscape is pictured as a funeral scene of delicate and hushed beauty. The icy hand of winter has, for the moment, killed the earth and is now spreading over the corpse a vast "funeral cloth" of snow; meanwhile, the branches of the "winter-weary elms" bend slowly and reverently under their white mantles, like so many mourners paying dutiful homage to the earth.

In the second stanza, however, the theme of death is forgotten. The poet dreams of Africa, fertile Africa, basking in the warm sunshine. His theme changes to birth and growth:

Then I dreamed a dream  
in my dead sleep. But I dreamed  
not of earth dying and elms a vigil  
keeping. I dreamed of birds, black  
birds flying in my inside, nesting  
and hatching on oil palms bearing suns  
for fruits and with roots denting the  
uprooters' spades. And I dreamed the  
uprooters tired and limp, leaning on  
roots -  
their abandoned roots  
and the oil palms gave them each a sun.

He dreams of birds building nests and hatching their eggs.

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<sup>I</sup>Frances Ademola, Reflections, (Lagos), 1962, p.56.

Instead of bent "winter-weary elms," he sees tall, upright palm trees "bearing suns for fruits" and with roots tough enough to dent spades. The contrast is carefully planned. There is even a contrast in colour, for the nesting birds, symbolically black for the homeland, stand out starkly against the poem's prevailing backcloth of white, which the first stanza establishes and the last re-emphasises.

The poem reveals a typical Okara progression from sad reality to an upsurge of joy and a return to reality once more. Thus, after dreaming of Africa with its fruitfulness and life, the poet awakens to the silently falling snow and, as it were, the triumph of the death symbols:

Then I awoke; I awoke  
to the silently falling snow  
and bent-backed elms bowing and  
swaying to the winter wind like  
white-robed Moslems salaaming at evening  
prayer, and the earth lying inscrutable  
like the face of a god in a shrine.

The image of the elms is the outstanding feature of the poem. Aware of this and conscious of the need for artistic unity, Okara uses it on two occasions - at the beginning and the end, the key points in the poem. But the poet's skill and sensibility go further; when the image is repeated Okara seizes an opportunity to enrich his work by subtly changing the image's accompanying simile. In the first stanza the elm's branches, "winter stripped and nude," were said to "bow like grief-stricken mourners;"

in the last, however, it is not the branches but the "bent-backed elms" themselves that sway to "the winter wind like white-robed Moslems salaaming at evening prayer." The image has been slightly modified and expanded and in the process has, indeed, been improved, for the hauntingly resonant "salaaming"--surely a splendidly poetic word--adds a fine touch of the aural to an image essentially visual in nature. Finally, though in one sense the expanded image is used to restate the main elements of its original (the Moslems, like the mourning elm trees, are "white-robed") it also helps Okara's aim of symmetry through balance; for while the "grief-stricken mourners" of the first stanza are decidedly part of a wintry northern scene, the salaaming Moslems of the last just as surely belong in the warm Tropics. And, while the mourners grieve over the death of the earth, the Moslems' evening prayer is no doubt one of Thanksgiving for life.

This, then, is the poetry of Okara--rich in its symbolism, serious in its themes and structured with care. Recording with scrupulous honesty his personal response to life, he can take his place alongside those other Nigerian poets whose work stands as a silent refutation of Janheinz Jahn's assertion that the African poet is never "concerned with his own nature, with his individuality."<sup>1</sup> With Okara

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<sup>1</sup>Janheinz Jahn, Muntu (London 1961), p. 148 and quoted by Moore and Beier, Modern Poetry from Africa, p. 21.

however, the promise is more important than the achievement, for the overall quality of his work suggests that he is struggling hard to reach beyond mere style and catch at what Epictetus calls "the best and master thing," that is, life itself.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The idea of course comes from Arnold's Essay on Wordsworth.

### A USE FOR LITERACY: NIGERIAN POPULAR LITERATURE

A curious by-product of the gradual spread of literacy in Nigeria has been the genesis of not one but two literatures. For alongside the verse of Okara or the prose fiction of Achebe, work that is ~~(which is)~~ aimed at a world audience, there has grown up a rare species of sub-literature, remarkably vigorous in its way yet modestly intended only for an audience of semi-literate Africans.

As far as one can tell, this new growth is confined almost entirely to the big market town of Onitsha in Eastern Nigeria. With a population of 88,000, Onitsha is an old town that sprawls along the east bank of the Niger offering farmers and river folk from a wide area the biggest open market in West Africa. Here will congregate fisherman from the Niger Delta, Fulani cattlemen from the North and Yoruba cocoa merchants from the West. Among the vendors of garri and bananas there are bookstalls, too, whose stocks hitherto rarely went beyond exercise books, writing materials and simplified versions of Oliver Twist, or whatever other text the Examination Council was currently prescribing. A recent feature of the stalls, however, has been the appearance of a motley array of cheap ephemeral literature.

The books are of pamphlets size, badly printed and seldom more than fifty pages long. Prices range from 1/6 to

3/- and often one man will be both printer and publisher. Despite their crudely amateurish production, circulation figures can apparently reach 5000, though a thousand copies per edition seems to be the general rule.<sup>1</sup> According to Mr. Ulli Beier, there were over a hundred different titles on display when last he visited Onitsha.

The subject matter is fairly broad--books of advice and warning rub shoulders with noveletter, romantic tragedies, guides to prosperity and political pamphlets. The following titles are typical enough for illustration:

Beware of Harlots and Many Friends  
 About the Husband and Wife Who Hate Themselves  
 Beauty is a Trouble  
 Why Boys Never Trust Money-Monger Girls  
 How Tshombe and Mobutu Regretted After the Death  
 of Lumumba  
 Drunkards Believe Bar as Heaven  
 Boys and Girls of Nowadays  
 What is Life? (Dedicated to Moral Regeneration)  
 How to Write Good English, Letters, Compositions  
 and Welcome Address  
 Rosemary and the Taxi Driver  
 How John Kennedy Suffered in Life and Death  
 Suddenly <sup>2</sup>

Authors, it seems, can earn up to ten guineas for a good manuscript. In general they are as poorly educated as their readers, despite the patronising tone of a writer like O. Olisa, whose drama About the Husband and Wife,

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<sup>1</sup>These figures are suggested by Ulli Beier in an article "Public Opinion on Lovers," published in Black Orpheus, February 1964.

<sup>2</sup>The Mills Memorial Library, McMaster University, has recently acquired seventeen Onitsha pamphlets.



dedicated to "The Youths of Nigeria and Writers of Literatures," contains the following prefatory remarks:

This book is written in simple English to enable many readers who are only semi-illiterates to read it and understand. Very high words are avoided. You enjoy the interest in the book, that is all. All the dramatist personal are imaginary human beings. Any body claiming any name in this book does so at his own foolishness.<sup>1</sup>

As a rule, real names are used, though several authors have adopted racy noms-de-plume. One, for instance, calls himself Speedy Eric and another Highbred Maxwell, while probably the most facetious is Master of Life Who Obtained The Title M. L. at the Commensense College. Some will be obscure provincial newspapermen, others taxi drivers or low grade clerks. One, Cletus Gibson Nwosu, author of Miss Cordelia, we know to be a schoolboy, for the writer of his Foreword says so:

"Cletus as I know him is one of the Nigerian School boys who delights in the attempt of things that are bold. When he asked me to write a foreword to his book, I was surprised because I never expected he could hold his studies in one hand and use the other in compiling a book so wonderfully exciting."<sup>2</sup>

With a training in English scarcely beyond the primary level, the style of these authors is, necessarily,

<sup>1</sup>O. Olisa, About the Husband and Wife (Onitsha), The Preface. No date or pagination available.

<sup>2</sup>No date or pagination available.

a gay patchwork of mangled syntax, ill-digested idioms, misapplied rules and startling neologisms. The following brief sample is taken from Little John in the Love Adventure by Charles N. Eze:

Evidently, the girl tried all her possible best to send a telegram to her parents telling them, boldly anyway, that her boy friend was between the fire and the deep sea because he fell in love with her. <sup>1</sup>

Strenuous attempts to appear scholarly are, however, tempered in some cases by impressive displays of humility. The author of a pamphlet on Ogbuefi Azikiwe, the President of Nigeria, admits he "will be very grateful to receive constructive criticisms, "while the self-styled "dramatist and novelist" Okenwa Olisa confesses, "I cannot claim that I am a good Dramatist, but I believe that practice makes perfect." Most touching of all is the anxiety of one author over his book that "readers should mind very little the poor English it contains, which is hoped to be amended when this book will celebrate her publication."

Oddities of style fall into several categories. Frequently an attempt is made to use words the writer has probably never seen written or has only imperfectly heard:

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<sup>1</sup> C. N. Eze, Little John in the love Adventure (Onitsha), p. 34.

another incidence occured  
 two men leaving together in one room  
 with a potmantea in hand, you move into a hotel.  
 in Chief Jombo's Palour <sup>1</sup>

Then there are the half-remembered idioms that crop up time after time, as fitting reminders that the men of Onitsha are using English not as their mother tongue but as a second language, badly taught and only imperfectly understood:

Whether a man is poorer than a  
 church rat, he is liable to tax.  
 Pressure was brought and bear on me  
 People will look you very down  
 Cleanliness is holiness  
 Let us get the village priest who will  
 get us into<sup>o</sup>holy wedlock  
 I hope one and sundry will enjoy this  
 story  
 She had developed her crime waves in  
 Lagos

More probably from ignorance than from boredom with conventional English, the Onitsha writers have a habit of effecting rapid linguistic innovations, forcing words into new and sometimes startling usages:

Her father messaged me  
 He is a lovely someone  
 Bystanders jealoused me  
 Further endurance would only tantamount to...foolishness  
 I would accept them and be accessed to the lady of my  
 choice  
 It was headaching  
 He tried to show his Bignamity

At a time when English prose style has been refined to ever greater degrees of sophistication it is refreshing to encounter

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<sup>1</sup>The examples of style quoted here can be found in almost all of the Onitsha pamphlets in the Mills Memorial Library.

the gawky efforts of Onitsha. If semantic violence is done to our language, it nevertheless seems to come to little harm. Indeed the Onitsha style often achieves a crude life all its own, especially when it presses into service some particularly striking piece of imagery. Ulli Beier, for instance, cites the extraordinarily effective description of drunkards who "swilled all round, extending the waistbands of their pants"<sup>1</sup> and also what is surely a stroke of sheer genius from an author who, in an attempt to express complete and utter failure in life, writes, "my name is written in white ink on white paper."<sup>2</sup>

Considerations of style apart, the Onitsha writings should not be too lightly dismissed, for in their uncouth fashion they are reflecting and recording one of the most profound changes taking place in Africa today. The notion of romantic love, so much in evidence among the pamphlet titles, is a recent importation into West Africa from the western world and seems to be at the heart of a whole new way of life that is emerging. The new mode has been dubbed "Highlife" and embodies a modern brand of hedonism, choosing as life's most important goals unlimited pleasure, drinking

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<sup>1</sup>Ulli Beier, "Popular Opinion on Lovers," Black Orpheus No. 14, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 7

big cars, western dress and indiscriminate sexual poaching.<sup>1</sup> Oddly enough, academic prowess also ranks high on the list of priorities, undoubtedly because it is identified with financial gain and the white man's prestige. The many love letters in the pamphlets are sent from important-sounding grammar school addresses, while characters in the plays are frequently young teachers or undergraduates. The style is a useful guide here, especially when we encounter such <sup>exaggerated</sup> expressions as "the round face that nature has awarded her as a scholarship" and "she was a beautiful certificated lady."

In a country where the ideally beautiful woman has long been rather plump, the Highlife generation, following at a distance the tastes of Europe and America, now prefers more slender lines: the modest maiden from the countryside has been replaced by the meretricious nymphs of the town.

This is the social group who provide both authors and audience for the Onitsha writings and, broadly speaking, this is the first group to have rejected the traditional pattern of African life. Rarely educated above the most elementary level, they have not gone very far in being "westernised," but already find themselves in strong opposition to the old order with its strict code of conduct,

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<sup>1</sup>Many of the pamphlets, of course, passionately denounce Highlife and its values and support traditional morality.

heavy demands on family and clan loyalty and its tight rein on freedom. These are the young people at whom an advertisement inside the cover of Eze's Little John in Love screams, "HELLO!. GAY BOYS! REMEMBER OSAJI TAILORS, MAKERS OF YOUR FAVOURITE SUITS, JEANS, AMERICAN JACKETS AND MODERN PENS TROUSERS," and whom another addresses with, "MODERN FASHIONABLE GENTLEMEN, GO <sup>GAY</sup> WITH WOOLLEN TROUSERS, SMART SHIRTS, JACKET, TERYLENE, BOTH STRIPE AND PLAIN OF ALL KINDS."

As Chinua Achebe recently suggested in the "New Statesman," these young Africans are ashamed of their heritage and want to destroy all vestiges of it as soon as possible.<sup>1</sup> They are, to understate the matter, Negritudes' least enthusiastic admirers, and would probably prefer to be white. Certainly, the pictures gracing the covers of the Onitsha pamphlets are, almost without exception, of white people--pretty film stars of the forties in romantic situations or young ladies sharing a drink with their escorts.

Where modern ways are extolled, the values of another age are trampled under foot. Significantly, then, when traditional people appear, they are always the fools, the boors,

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<sup>1</sup>Chinua Achebe, "The Novelist as Teacher," New Statesman, Jan. 29th., 1965, p. 161.

the ignorant, to be despised or laughed to scorn. Time and again the Onitsha writers use the stock situation of an illiterate father trying to marry off his daughter to a wealthy acquaintance. The "enlightened" daughter, of course, rebels and usually manages to marry the man she loves.

A typical specimen is Veronica My Daughter, a play by Ogali A. Ogali (Snr.). Veronica is a modern young lady (who, therefore, does not use her African name) being forced into an arranged marriage by her father, Chief Jombo. The fiance is Chief Bassey, a man of substance and respected under the old order, but an impossible match for Veronica. She has eyes only for Mike, a smart young journalist who can readily quote Goethe and Bishop Latimer and who already has earned himself a sparkling Intermediate B.A.

Ogali rushes to attack traditional society soon after the play has begun, in a speech where Veronica outlines her problem:

That is where I have disagreed with my old illiterate father who wants me to marry a person of his choice. If my father Chief Jombo had attended even infant school as to be able to write and read simple English, am sure he would have known that girls of nowadays choose their own husbands themselves. I am in love with a young boy by name Michael popularly known as Mike. He is the only person I can marry. But father wants me to marry one old money-monger of the first order whose name is Chief Bassey a grade one illiterate.

Writing a comedy, Ogali finds it convenient to poke fun at Chief Jombo, portraying him as an ignorant fool whose English never rises above pidgin. On Jombo's first entry, for example, he is heard shouting:

What kind trouble be dis. My daughter get strong ear too much. I floggam tire, no change, talk tire, no change. Dis boy Mikere go killi my daughter . . . I tell Veronica leave Mikere, Veronica say no. I tell Mikere leave Veronica. Mikere say no. Wetten you say make I do?<sup>1</sup>

The end is predictable enough; true love must inevitably triumph over such bucolic harshness and ignorance. Veronica wins the man she seeks and Chief Bassey is left disappointed. Exulting in the righteousness of his cause, Ogali brings the play to a grandiose finish with an impressive build-up of euphoria, the conversion of the traditionalists and an **authoritative** if mutilated quotation from Confucius (spelt Confusion).

"Our great test glory is not in never be falling but in rising every time we fall."<sup>2</sup>

The studious young couple are triumphantly united in a marriage service at the Cathedral and, as the curtain goes down, there is a strong feeling that one more nail has been driven into the coffin of Old Africa.

In case readers should miss the play's rather obvious message, it is elucidated in the following lines

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 40.



from the foreword:

Chief Jombo must have learnt his lesson: in this modern age and indeed at all times, it is unfair and improper to impose a husband on a girl. Veronica deserves praise for denouncing the wealthy Chief Bassey in preference to poor Mike, the man dear to her heart.<sup>1</sup>

For those who choose to read our literary history as the history of the emancipation of women, this basic concern in the Onitsha writings must sound like a strange echo from the past; from the eighteenth century, for instance, when the social position of women, dramatised so often as the lonely heart pitting itself against tyrannical convention, was a major theme with writers such as Richardson and Fielding.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the importance of the Onitsha writing for the future of Nigerian literature must be that there exists here a large pool of untrained, and virtually untapped, talent. There are men of imagination here, sure of their new world and eager to give their views on it; men with a desire to instruct, entertain, and indulge a healthy interest

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., Foreword; no pagination.

<sup>2</sup> As a magistrate, Fielding was particularly concerned with the unjust position of women under the law. Indeed, lady Bellaston in Tom Jones can be seen as a kind of eighteenth century suffragette, refusing marriage at all costs, partly from a fear of male tyranny and principally because she would have to surrender all her property.

in people and personal relationships. In its way, Onitsha market is a useful literary training ground and it is worth noting that already the majority of Nigerian novelists hail from this area of the Republic. Nkem Nwankwo, whose novel Danda has recently been published by Andre Deutsch, was born here; so too was Onuora Nzekwa, author of the novels Wand of Noble Wood and Blade Among the Boys .

Indeed, Nigeria's most prolific novelist, Cyprian Ekwensi, an author who has published in many parts of the world, began his career with a pamphlet entitled "When Love Whispers" written especially for the market vendors of Onitsha.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>O. Nzekwu, Wand of Noble Wood, (London), 1961

<sup>2</sup>O. Nzekwu, Blade Among the Boys, (London), 1962

AMOS TUTUOLA: PALM WINE DRINKARD

Perhaps because he can be too easily classified with the Onitsha writers, Amos Tutuola remains the loneliest figure among Nigeria's more reputable authors. He has never been forgiven for being the first Nigerian to reach a truly world audience. His Palm Wine Drinkard was published by Fabers in 1952 (to the acute embarrassment of educated Nigerians) and has since been translated into eleven languages. On its appearance, Dylan Thomas is reported to have described it as "brief, thronged, grisly and bewitching," adding that "nothing is too prodigious or too trivial to put down in this tall, devilish story."

To the Englishman, perhaps bored with the kind of prose Orwell described as "phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house," the semi-literate style of Tutuola must have provided delightful titillation.<sup>1</sup> To Nigerians trying to show the world a civilised image of their country, however, it suggested the obvious risk that foreign readers would believe all Nigerians wrote like that. And dark mutterings

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<sup>1</sup>George Orwell, Inside the Whale (London), 1962. p. 145.

have been heard ever since. A reporter on the African Writers' Conference of 1962 wrote in the East African journal Transition:

African writers protested against the publishing of bad African literature with broad - and unfortunate - hints that Amos Tutuola would probably not have been published if his manuscript had been read by an African reader. <sup>I</sup>

The fable of Tutuola's first book is a simple one. Drinkard's palm-wine tapster dies and Drinkard goes into the land of the dead to find him; he does so but cannot bring him back and so returns without him. Tutuola opens his narrative at a rapid pace, wasting little time on preliminaries:

I was a palm-wine drinkard since I was a boy of ten years of age. I had no other work more than to drink palm-wine in my life. In those days we did not know other money, except COWRIES, <sup>so</sup> that everything was very cheap, and my father was the richest man in our town.

My father got eight children and I was the eldest among them, all the rest were hard workers, but I myself was an expert palm-wine drinkard. I was drinking palm-wine from morning to night and from night to morning. By this time I could not drink ordinary water at all except palm-wine.

But when my father noticed that I could not do any work more than to drink, he engaged an expert palm-wine tapster for me; he had no other work more than to tap palm-wine every day. So my father gave me a palm-tree farm which was nine miles square and it contained 560,000 palm trees, and this palm-wine tapster was tapping one hundred and fifty kegs of palm-wine every morning, but before 2 o'clock P.M., I would have drunk all of it. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>I</sup> Bloke Modisane, 'African Writers' Summit,' Transition, II,v, (Aug. 1962), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Amos Tutuola, Palm Wine Drinkard, (London, 1962),p.7.

This opening passage, with its ravished logic and its unselfconscious manner of assuming the reader will accept without question the most outlandish details, is a typical sample of Tutuola's style. Shortly after the death of Drinkard's father, Tapster falls down a tree and dies. On finding the body, Drinkard displays touching sympathy by immediately climbing a tree, tapping some more wine and drinking his fill. When the wine supplies run dry (Drinkard, presumably, is now too lazy to tap for himself) Drinkard's friends desert him, a circumstance that gives rise to some serious moral reflection:

When I saw that there was no palm wine for me again, and nobody could tap it for me, then I thought within myself that old people were saying that the whole people who had died in this world, did not go to heaven directly, but were living in one place somewhere in this world. So that I said that I would find out where my palm-wine tapster who had died was. I

His concern to find Tapster, however, seems to stem from desperate thirst rather than from humanitarian feelings, an opinion shared by Wole Soyinka in his humorous essay 'Salutations to the Gut.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Frances Ademola, Reflections, (Lagos, 1962), p.II7.

There is no diffidence with Tutuola, only an enormous creative confidence that proclaims him to be absolutely sure of his spirit world and of his place in it. There is no gap between his real and his declared self; hence his complete imaginative participation in what he is narrating; hence also the rough and tumble spontaneity, the wonderfully ingenuous unveiling of the private world of his imagination and the crude but vigorous prose style.

Once Drinkard sets off on his quest the familiar good and evil figures of heroic myth appear, sometimes blocking his path and occasionally helping him with advice or magical protection. At times they make him undertake tasks in exchange for news of Tapster's whereabouts. His journey can be seen either as a descent into the Underworld (an African version of the Orpheus legend perhaps) or simply as a fantastic quest into the "heart of darkness."<sup>1</sup> As narrator, Tutuola is Drinkard and therefore the hero of the tale:

One fine morning, I took all my native juju and also my father's juju with me and I left my father's hometown to find out whereabouts was my tapster who had died . . . towns and villages were not near each other as nowadays, and as I was travelling from bushes to bushes and from forests to forests

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<sup>1</sup>That Tutuola's story can be seen as a descent into the Underworld is a widely held opinion and certainly Gerald Moore expresses it. At no point in the narrative, however, is there any suggestion of Drinkard descending beneath the earth. Drinkard's belief that dead people before going to heaven "were living in one place somewhere in this world" seems to suggest a location remote in the mighty forests rather than some subterranean area.

and sleeping inside it for many days and months, I was sleeping on the branches of trees, because spirits etc. were just like partners, and to save my life from them; and again I could spend two or three months before reaching a town or village. Whenever I would reach a town or a village, I would spend almost four months there, to find out my palm-wine tapster from the inhabitants of that town or village and if he did not reach there, then I would leave there and continue my journey to another town or village. <sup>1</sup>

For all its crudity, this passage shows how curiously effective Tutuola's style can be. The very absence of precise details of time or direction gives the impression that Drinkard has already travelled far and long into the unknown. There is no fixed direction, no paths, no time schedule; all is darkness and mystery.

Months after leaving home, Drinkard arrives at a town and there calls on an old man, in reality a god. For information on Tapster, Drinkard must perform two tasks for the old man. When the first is completed, Tutuola tells us, without the slightest suggestion of shock, that the old man wakes Drinkard up at 6:30 in the morning, gives him a big strong net and tells him to go and bring Death from his house. The significance of this is plain: to cross the border into the land of the "deads" and remain an "alive", Drinkard must conquer Death who guards the frontier post. Confident in his powers as "father of the gods who can do anything in this world," Drinkard blithely sets forth to look for Death's house. More convincingly than a mediaeval writer,<sup>2</sup> Tutuola really does personify

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<sup>1</sup> Palm Wine Drinkard, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> More convincing, certainly, than Chaucer's portrayal of Death in the Pardoner's Tale.

Death. He is here as much a human being as the author himself. He has a nice tropical house in the forest, with a verandah, European style, and a yam garden. With the kind of touch that makes Tutuola's narrative so convincing, he says that Death happened to be working in the garden when Drinkard arrives--as any man might well be doing. Death calls out from the garden, "Is that man still alive or dead?" and, with impressive logic, Drinkard replies, "I am still alive and I am not a dead man." Vexed at this, Death commands a rolling drum to throw its strings round Drinkard and bind him tightly; "as a matter of fact," says Drinkard, "the strings of the drum tightened me so that I was hardly breathing."<sup>1</sup> But Drinkard also knows a trick or two and is easily a match for Death. His answer to virtual strangulation is a severe beating--meted out to Death by the yam stakes in his own garden, on orders from Drinkard. Death calls a truce at this point and, in perfectly normal African manner, takes his enemy to the verandah, shakes hands with him and ushers him into the house.

Tutuola now brings into play his torrential imagination:

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<sup>1</sup>Palm Wine Drinkard, p. 12.



He took me around his house and his yam garden too, he showed me the skeleton bones of human-beings which he had killed since a century ago and showed me many other things also, but there I saw that he was using skeleton bones of human beings as fuel woods and skull heads of human-beings as his basins, plates and tumblers etc. I

Such macabre details do not seriously worry Drinkard, though when darkness falls the prospect of spending the night in Death's house evoke's some minor feelings of apprehension:

So when I wanted to sleep at night, he gave me a wide black cover cloth and then gave me a separate room to sleep inside, but when I entered the room, I met a bed which was made with bones of human-beings; but as this bed was terrible to look at or to sleep on it, I slept under it instead, because I knew his trick already. Even as this bed was very terrible, I was unable to sleep under as I lied down there because of fear of the bones of human-beings, but I lied down there awoke. <sup>2</sup>

At "two o'clock in the midnight," Death creeps in, violettly clubs the bed three times and withdraws, confident that his guest is now slain. Thus, when morning comes, Drinkard badly shocks Death by going to his room and waking him up. Then later, spurred on by this success, he digs a hole in the road nearby, spreads his net and soon has Death trapped. Without more ado, he rolls up the net, puts the load on his head and strides away, for all the world as

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.13.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.13.

though he is carrying a tray of bananas to market. The sight of Drinkard staggering into town with Death ensnared on his head terrifies the old man who orders Drinkard to take Death back at once. However, doubtless tired after a rather exhausting trip, Drinkard flings down his load, Death promptly escapes and "the whole people in that town ran away for their lives and left their properties there."<sup>1</sup> This brings the book's first major episode to a close and Drinkard, casually pushing his story back into the mists of time, sums it up as follows:

so that since the day that I had brought Death out from his house, he has no permanent place to dwell or stay, and we are hearing his name about in the world <sup>2</sup>

Notice how lightly Tutuola makes this enormous claim, that he, alone, of all mankind, was responsible for allowing Death to roam abroad in the world. There is no polite request to the reader to suspend belief for a moment, no knowing wink or tongue in the cheek. Tutuola's narrative is, quite simply, offered as solid bedrock fact. In a way, it is rather reminiscent of Defoe; there is the same wealth of circumstantial detail, whose only justification would seem to be that events actually happened in just that way. The abrupt dislocations of rhythm and syntax and the

<sup>1</sup>  
Ibid., p. 15

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 16

constant repetition of salient details seem to suggest that the narrator is constantly struggling to make the situation clear to himself as well as to us. It is an indication of how firmly Tutuola belongs in the African oral tradition.

If Tutuola vaguely resembles Defoe, the comparison with Bunyan is perhaps much closer. The critic Gerald Moore points out that both writers are men of little formal education, visionaries almost, who seize on images of the popular imagination and use them for their own purposes. He cites Bunyan's Appolyon, who was:

Hideous to behold, he was clothed with scales like a Fish (and they are his pride), he had wings like a Dragon, out of his belly came Fire and Smoke, and his mouth was as the mouth of a Lion . . . <sup>1</sup>

and compares it with the Red Fish in Palm Wine Drinkard, whose:

head was just like a tortoise's head, but it was as big as an elephant's head and it had over 30 horns and large eyes which surrounded the head. All these horns were spread out like an umbrella. It could not walk but was only gliding on the ground like a snake and its body was just like a bat's body. <sup>2</sup>

One of the more interesting stages of Drinkard's journey to Deads' Town is his sojourn with the 'FAITHFUL MOTHER.' Travelling through the bush, Drinkard and his newly-wedded wife find a white tree, one thousand and fifty feet long and two hundred feet broad. Hands appear and pull them through

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Moore, Seven African Writers, (London, 1962), p. 43.

Amos Tutuola, Palm Wine Drinkard, (London, 1962), p. 79.

a door that opens in the trunk. The narrative continues:

When we entered inside the white tree, there we found ourselves inside a big house which was in the centre of a big and beautiful town, then the hands directed us to an old woman, and after the hands disappeared. So we met the old woman sat on a chair in a big parlour which was decorated with costly things, then she told us to sit down before her and we did so . . . she said that her name was called 'FAITHFUL-MOTHER' and she told us that she was only helping those who were in difficulties and enduring punishments but not killing anybody. <sup>I</sup>

Faithful Mother provides a kind of rest house on Drinkard's long dangerous journey. Here, he and his wife are secure from the horrors of the bush and enjoy what might well be an African paradise: lavish supplies of free food and drink, a dance hall where they can dance all day and all night beneath swirling coloured lights and alongside uncountable orchestras, musicians, dancers and tappers. There is even a hospital where the couple are given medicine to restore their hair, "which the people of the "Unreturnable-Heaven's town" had cleared with broken bottles by force." <sup>2</sup>

It is hard to determine Faithful Mother's precise significance. Gerald Moore believes that she is the "Mother

<sup>I</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

Ibid., p. 69.

Goddess; while the White Tree may be identified as the usual symbol for the World Navel (Ygddrasil, the Bo Tree, the golden apple-tree in the Garden of Hesperides, the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden).<sup>1</sup> This might well be accurate commentary and no doubt the archetypal school of critics would find the whole of Tutuola's work a richly rewarding field. A more homely explanation might be that Faithful Mother is quite simply every African's mother. In African society, and particularly among the Yoruba, mothers have a high place of importance, especially aged mothers who are revered because they are responsible for giving constant succour and protection to the younger members of the family. Carried on his mother's back, the African child has an extremely close bond with her both physically and psychologically; and this would be emphasised in a polygamous household where the father is a distant figure and not easily approached. Not surprisingly, there is running through all West African literature a very strong vein of mother-worship. The powerful invocation that opens Camara Laye's African child ("Black woman, woman of Africa, O my mother, I am thinking of you . . .") marks the beginning of an autobiography whose constantly recurring theme is the mother-son relationship.<sup>2</sup> A similarly strong

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<sup>1</sup>Seven African Writers, p. 46-47

<sup>2</sup>Camara Laye, African Child, (London), 1960 p. 5

attachment is found in Ekwensi's People of the City, in Achebe's Things Fall Apart and also in his No Longer at Ease, where Obi's feelings for his mother are conveyed in such touching expressions as "he wore her sadness round his neck like a necklace of stone." That Faithful Mother represents, or is intended to recall, the typical African mother and that she embodies all the protective warmth and kindness every African associates with his mother, seems as useful an interpretation as Gerald Moore's. Occasionally, literary interpretation works best at levels very close to those of everyday life.

As for the White Tree, there seems to be no strong reason why Tutuola should be thinking of the Tree of Knowledge or the golden apple-tree, let alone of some kind of World Navel. Giant cotton silk trees are considered sacred and magical in Western Nigeria because of their enormous size. A Nigerian audience could thus think immediately of this kind of tree when Tutuola reaches the appropriate part of his story. The contents of the tree might explain its white colour:

She took us to the largest dancing ahll which was in the centre of the house . . . The hall was decorated with about one million pounds and there were many images and our own too were in the centre of the hall. But our own images that we saw there resembled us too much and were also white colour . . . perhaps

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somebody who was focusing us as a photographer at the first time before the hands drew us inside the white tree had made them, we could not say . . . There we saw all the lights in this hall were in technicolours and they were changing colours at five minute intervals . . . Then she took us to her hospital . . . 1

"Dancing Hall," "one million pounds," "white colour," "photographer," "twenty stages," "technicolours," "hospital" ---all these leave us in little doubt of what Tutuola is thinking. If this is an African paradise, it looks suspiciously western in conception. We might suggest, then, that the White Tree and its luxuries are loosely associated in Tutuola's mind with the white man because these, if nothing else, are what the white man has brought to Africa.

When Drinkard eventually reaches the Deads' town, he finds it is impossible to take his dead tapster back home with him. Tapster explains that "deads" cannot go back with "alives" nor can they live alongside one another. There is, in any case, an awkward habit the "deads" have of walking backwards, which would certainly prove rather hazardous outside the realms of Deads' town. To ease his disappointment, Drinkard is allowed to return with a magic egg which, like Aladdin's lamp, offers him virtual omnipotence. After a hazardous return journey, during which Tutuola conjures up for the appalling image of endless lines

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<sup>1</sup>Palm Wine Drinkard, p. 68

of aggressive 'dead' infants, Drinkard arrives home in time to find his village in the grips of an acute famine. The egg obeys his command to produce food and drink but the people, overjoyed, accidentally smash the egg. Drinkard gums it together again but this time it produces whips, punishes the people and finally disappears. Thus the famine continues and other remedies are devised:

We made a sacrifice of two fowls, 6 kolas, one bottle of palm oil, and 6 bitter kolas. Then we killed the fowls and put them in a broken pot, after that we put the kolas and poured the oil in the pot. <sup>1</sup>

The famine, it seems, is being caused by a dispute between Heaven and Earth. Trying to prove his seniority, Heaven is making sure that the earth is starved of rain. Someone must therefore carry the offerings up to Heaven to pacify him and this means human sacrifice. Tutuola innocently observes:

First we chose one of the king's attendants, but that one refused to go, then we chose one of the poorest men in the town and he refused also, at last we chose one of the king's slaves who took the sacrifice to heaven for Heaven who was senior to Land and Heaven received the sacrifice with gladness. <sup>2</sup>

There is little consolation in all this for the poor wretch chosen to go up to heaven, for on his way back to earth, Heaven decides to show his appeasement by sending down a

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 124

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 124-125



torrential shower of rain that beats him cruelly. When at last he is washed down to his village and wants to take shelter, the villagers slam their doors in his face, fearing, quite rightly, that he has returned to collect another gift for Heaven! His fate, however, is of no importance to Tutuola, who is more concerned with the ending of the famine: he closes his "brief, thronged, grisly story" on a touchingly gentle note:

But when for three months the rain had been falling regularly, there was no famine again.<sup>1</sup>

Outside Nigeria Tutuola continues to enjoy fairly wide recognition; since Palm Wind Drinkard appeared in 1952, Fabers have also published My Life in the Bush of Ghosts (1954), Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle (1955) and The Brave African Huntress (1958). At home he is still regarded as a kind of national embarrassment. In a letter from Ibadan recently, the writer O. R. Dathorne (who believes Tutuola and Soyinka are the best Nigerian Writers yet to emerge) writes: "I am afraid it is true that he (Tutuola) is still having a tough time . . . and he is still with the N. B. C. in Ibadan as a storekeeper." He adds that

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 125.

he will be publishing a short story of Tutuola's in <sup>the</sup> next issue of "Black Orpheus." Perhaps in twenty or thirty years, when Nigerians can make a less emotional evaluation of Tutuola's work, this strange writer will be appreciated. Meanwhile, it is not easy to answer a purely literary charge that Tutuola's work represents no more than a fascinating cul-de-sac. He must be given the praise due to innovators, but, unlike innovators such as Kyd and Fielding, he is not creating a form that can be handed on.

Tutuola's position, then, is one of isolation. As Nigeria's first successful writer, he holds the exalted post of storekeeper with Radio Nigeria. With the younger generation of authors, men like Achebe, Clark, Ekwensi and Soyinka, he appears to have no contact; for unlike him they are University men and members of Nigeria's new elite. In the national press he is rarely mentioned. In his home town of Abeokuta, the elders will speak proudly of their town's achievements--its fame as capital of Yorubaland, its great victory over the invading Amazon armies of Dahomey in 1851, its sons who have become bishops and government ministers; but of humble Tutuola scarcely a word is heard.

## CHINUA ACHEBE

Chinua Achebe was born at Ogidi, a village near the River Niger, in 1930. His father was one of the first Ibos from the interior to work for the Church Missionary Society and his grandfather could recall the arrival of the first Christian Missionaries, whom he welcomed with great hospitality. The far-reaching effects of this early encounter on tribal life are the subject of Achebe's first novel, Things Fall Apart. Achebe was able to attend a good Government Grammar School at Umuahia and from there went up to University College, Ibadan, where he was a member of the first group of undergraduates to follow a full degree course.

At present Achebe is Director of External Broadcasting for the Nigerian Broadcasting Company and this post he combines with his vocation as the nation's most respected novelist. His first two books, Things Fall Apart (1958) and No Longer At Ease (1960) have already been translated into German, Italian and Spanish. A third novel, Arrow of God, was published by Heinemann in 1964.

In the New Statesman of January 29th, 1965, Achebe writes that he finds himself emerging as a teacher of Nigeria's youth and dismisses an allegation that African writers have

to write only for European or American readers. As evidence he quotes the 1964 sales for a paperback edition of Things Fall Apart, which were as follows: "about 800 copies in Britain; 20,000 in Nigeria; and about 2500 in all other places." The same pattern was also true for No Longer at Ease. He feels that most of his readers are either in school or college or have recently left, and cites a typical letter from one who writes, "Your novels serve as advice to us young."

To explain the kind of teaching he can do, Achebe talks about the Nigerian acceptance of racial inferiority, suggesting that his compatriots should re-examine the past to see where they went wrong. He uses the example of his own childhood, when he carried to the stream not a locally made water pot but a cylindrical biscuit tin while the other members of his family carried a four gallon kerosene container. A present day example appeared in the boys' school at which his wife teaches, where a boy said he wrote about winter instead of the harmattan because if he didn't "the other boys would call him a bushman."

Achebe continues:

Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse--to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of the word. Here, I think, my aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet. For no thinking African can escape the

pain of the wound in our soul. You have all heard of the African way to Socialism, of Negritude, and so on. They are all props we have fashioned at different times to help us get on our feet again. Once we are up we shan't need any of them any more . . . The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact he should march right in front . . . I for one would not wish to be excused. I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past - with all its imperfections - was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them. Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure. But who cares? Art is important but so is education of the kind I have in mind. And I don't see that the two <sup>can</sup> be mutually exclusive. In a recent anthology a Hausa folk-tale, having recounted the usual fabulous incidents, ends with these words:

He had several sons and daughters who grew up and helped in raising the standards of education in the country.

As I said elsewhere, if you consider this ending a naive anti-climax then you cannot know very much about Africa.

Achebe's remarks are quoted at length because it is valuable to learn precisely what a novelist is trying to do in his work and because they throw light on what will become an increasingly important element in the new literature from Nigeria.

Achebe chose the title for his first novel from Yeats's "The Second Coming:"

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer

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<sup>1</sup>New Statesman, January 29th., 1965, p.162.

Things fall apart: the centre cannot hold;  
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

It recounts the rise and fall of Okonkwo, a virile, proud and dignified Ibo, famous as a wrestler, skilled in farming and generally successful in the affairs of clan life. He was "a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars".<sup>2</sup> As the title suggests, Things Fall Apart also records the disintegration of the traditional Ibo way of life with the approach of the white man and Christianity. Misgivings about the darker side of Christian enlightenment and missionary endeavour are for the first time given artistic shape and with a quiet restraint that makes us listen sympathetically.

Okonkwo, the grandfather of Obi, the central figure of No Longer at Ease, is harsh to inferiors and members of his family, because he is anxious to avoid the bad reputation his father had among the clan; he had been a "flute-playing idler who even made a mess of dying, having to be thrown into the bad bush to perish of the dreaded swelling disease." Okonkwo's downfall, meant to be seen as a kind of tragedy, stems from a certain reckless belligerence in his character (his tragic flaw, no doubt) and from two misfortunes: for accidentally killing a man at a funeral he is exiled for seven

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<sup>1</sup>Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart, (London), 1962, p.7.

<sup>2</sup>Seven African Writers, p. 60

years and then after his return, during a dispute between his villagers and a white district officer, he murders a messenger sent to forbid a village meeting. Rather than surrender to the legal processes of a world in which his values are no longer respected, he commits suicide. This is strongly ironic for by suicide he is committing the grossest violation of the law observed under his cherished traditional dispensation.

Achebe recounts the Ibo past with much care and affection. It is certainly not just an anthropological novel, but there is, nevertheless, a wealth of anthropological detail which helps to recreate for us the completeness and dignity of the old tribal way of life. There are wrestling matches, recitals of folk tales, bride-price discussions, a consultation of the Agba Oracle, the Week of Peace, the surrendering of a hostage for blood guilt, the festival of the new yam and an Ibo prayer meeting.

But Achebe takes an objective view of the dispute between the old and the new; as the relaxed and economical style suggests, he is not anxious to rush to the defence of the old order or to condemn it either. A carefully detailed picture is offered and judgements are left to the reader. This however does not prevent him from recounting incidents from tribal life with a good deal of nostalgia. Indeed he has been quoted as saying, "I am basically an ancestor-worshipper, if you like. Not in the same sense as my

grandfather would do it . . . pouring palm-wine on the floor for the ancestors . . . with me it takes the form of a celebration and I feel a certain compulsion to do this".<sup>1</sup>

Seen through the eyes of an honest, pious Ibo such as Okonkwo, the arrival of European civilisation is nothing short of an unmitigated disaster. The tribe no longer speaks with one voice; its centre has gone to pieces. Christian and traditional factions develop which immediately breed conflict. White justice is dispensed ignorantly because the district officer knows neither the Ibo language nor its customary law; his native subordinates are dishonest bullies and, as strangers, are totally unsympathetic to Okonkwo's villagers.

In the beginning the Christian converts are the outcasts of Ibo society, osu cult-slaves and the parents of twins thrown out into the bush. But eventually even Nwoye, Okonkwo's own son, is converted, to the bitter disappointment of his father. Towards the end of the book, when clan unity has been irreparably damaged, there is a meeting of the people of Umuofia, addressed by an alder; his speech, tinged with pathos, registers the extent of the damage already inflicted by the European presence:

Are all the sons of Umuofia here? . . . They are not. They have broken the clan and gone their several ways. We who are here this morning have remained true to our fathers, but our brothers have deserted us and joined a stranger to soil their fatherland. If we fight the strangers we shall hit our brothers and perhaps shed the

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<sup>1</sup>See Cyprian Ekwensi's article, "African Literature," in Nigeria Magazine, No, 83, December 1964, p.294



blood of a clansman. But we must do it. Our fathers never dreamed of such a thing, they never killed their brothers. But a white man never came to them . . . We must root out this evil. <sup>1</sup>

This proud (but vain) gesture of defiance inflames the aggressive spirit of Okonkwo and when the District Officer's messengers suddenly arrive with orders to break up the meeting, he savagely beheads one of them, only to realise that it is a hopeless gesture:

Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discovered fright in that. He heard voices asking: "Why did he do it?"  
He wiped his machet in the sand and went away.<sup>2</sup>

Ingloriously, then, Okonkwo hangs himself. It is as though a whole way of life dies at the same time; and it is hard to resist a suspicion that Achebe is saying that the old order has allowed itself to die, has, indeed committed suicide. Okonkwo, the man who in life championed the old order and all it stood for, is deserted in death by his clansman who refuse to cut down his body:

'It is against our custom, said one of the men.' It is an abomination for a man to take

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<sup>1</sup>Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart, (London) 1958.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 182

his own life. It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it. That is why we ask your people to bring him down, because you are strangers . . .

Obierika, who had been gazing steadily at his friend's dangling body, turned suddenly to the District Commissioner and said ferociously:

"That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog."<sup>1</sup>

For his second novel, in which a young Nigerian returns from four impressionable years in England to find himself completely out of step with Nigerian society, Achebe chooses a title from Eliot's account of the Magi story:

We returned to our place, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation.  
With an alien people clutching their Gods.  
I should be glad of another death.

Because it is essentially a modern novel, whose action takes place in contemporary Nigeria, No Longer at Ease is more satisfying than Things Fall Apart. African readers must especially find this so since it deals so thoroughly with their present social situation.

Obi Okonkwo, son of Nwoye Okonkwo who appeared in Things Fall Apart, is the clever boy of his village, gaining the Cambridge School Certificate with distinction in all eight subjects. Keen

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 184-185

to send one of their bright youths to study in England, "the place where learning finally came to an end," the Umuofia Progressive Union (Lagos Branch) find Obi a natural choice. Obi seizes this opportunity with enthusiasm, for a university degree was the philosopher's touchstone. "It transmuted a third-class clerk on one hundred and fifty a year into a senior Civil Servant on five hundred and seventy, with car and luxuriously furnished quarters at nominal rent." It would enable him on his return to occupy a "European post" and to occupy a "European post" was second only to actually being a European. "It raised a man from the masses to the elite . . . <sup>1</sup>

Obi duly proceeds to the University of London where he reads for an honours degree in English, though the elders of the Union want him to qualify in law and return to fight their interminable land cases. We are given few details of Okonkwo's life in London except a passing reference to a poem or two and a growing desire he feels to reform Nigerian society when he goes home. His return voyage is uneventful apart from his important meeting with Clara, an Ibo nurse with whom he falls in love.

Back in Lagos Obi is given a splendid reception by the Umuofia Progressive Union, who are deeply impressed by their kinsman's academic prowess. Their simple pride and admiration shine through in the humorous and absurdly over-formal Welcome Address intoned by the Union's Secretary:

"Welcome address presented to Michael Obi

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<sup>1</sup>Chinua Achebe, No Longer at Ease, (London), 1960

Okonkwo, B.A. (Hons.), London, by the officers and members of the Umuofia Progressive Union on the occasion of his return from the United Kingdom in quest of the Golden Fleece. Sir, we the officers and members of the above named Union present with humility and gratitude this token of our appreciation of your unprecedented academic brilliance . . ."

He spoke of the great honour Obi had brought to the ancient town of Umuofia which could now join the comity of other towns in their march towards political irredentism, social equality and economic emancipation.

'The importance of having one of our sons in the vanguard of this march of progress is nothing short of axiomatic.' 1

They are proud when Obi is given the expected "European Post", as Scholarship Secretary in the Ministry of Education, and mean no harm when they gently remind him that the eight hundred pounds scholarship loan should be repaid at the rate of twenty pounds per month

This amount at first appears very small, but with the status of a European come inevitably European expenses; and the Union are anxious he should keep up appearances as an exemplary representative of Umuofia in the upper circles of Nigerian society. Thus, Obi buys a car, hires a chauffeur and moves into a flat at Ikoyi, the select European reservation of colonial days. But the car loan must be repaid, there is the question of insurance, and new tires to be bought from time to time. There is, too, the electricity in his apartment and the steward who looks after his meals. No doubt with great care he could live the European life and gradually clear off his debts. The point Achebe wants to stress, however, is that Obi is trying to live as a European--as the clan want him to--and at the same time

live according to the rules and obligations of tribal life. Thus his parents and family, still living the traditional life in Eastern Nigeria, have a strong economic hold on him. Medical bills for an ageing and sickly mother must be settled and fees paid so that a younger brother can stay at a grammar school. Nor can he refuse a request for money from a fellow Ibo who has fallen upon hard times. A crisis inevitably develops at the height of which Obi is seen quarreling with his servant, cutting down his food money, taking out bulbs that are wasteful, ordering cold baths instead of hot, and demanding that the fridge be switched off at seven o'clock each evening.

As economic difficulties multiply, they are aggravated by Obi's relationship with Clara, the nurse he plans to marry, who is an osu, or a member of a family set aside to serve a god and thus "forbidden caste to the end of time."<sup>1</sup> At this point, liberal ideas absorbed during four years in London come into head-on collision with the rules and prejudices of traditional society. Obi reflects after an argument on the subject with his friend Joseph:

It was scandalous that in the middle of the twentieth century a man could be barred from marrying a girl simply because her great-great-great-great-grandfather had been dedicated to serve a god . . . Quite unbelievable. And here was an educated man telling Obi he did not understand.

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<sup>1</sup> An M.P. in the British House of Commons suggested in 1954 that there were some 90,000 Osus in Eastern Nigeria. The system was officially abolished in 1956. See "Emancipation in Nigeria," an article by T.N. Tamuno in Nigeria Magazine, No. 82, Sept. 1964, p. 218.

<sup>2</sup> No longer at Ease, p. 72

Even Obi's father, a devout Christian, is unable to see the ogun taboo as mere superstition and will not give his blessing to Obi's proposed marriage.

"Ogun is like leprosy in the minds of our people I beg of you, my son not to bring the mark of shame and of leprosy into your family. If you do, your children and your children's children unto the third and fourth generations will curse your memory."<sup>1</sup>

Obi is in his parents' house when his father argues this point; and the odd thing is that here, in a traditional setting, away from the heady whirl of Lagos, Obi finds that the modern notions picked up abroad have not gone very deep; the traditional teaching is more firmly embedded than he suspected:

His mind was troubled not only by what had happened but also by the discovery that there was nothing in him with which to challenge it honestly. All day he had striven to raise his anger and his conviction, but he was honest enough with himself to realise that the response he got, no matter how violent it sometimes appeared, was not genuine. It came from the periphery and not the centre . . . <sup>2</sup>

The situation moves towards catastrophe with classic directness. There is an unwanted pregnancy and a sordid abortion for Clara, an experience that utterly destroys her dignity and drives her away from Obi, never again to return. Finally, hemmed in by an insuperable wall of expenses, commitments and unpaid debts, and yet scarcely before the freshness of a promising career has begun to fade, Obi is forced to tarnish

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 133

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 137

the standards he had brought so optimistically from London. He begins to take bribes. Eventually, with his debts almost settled he is caught doing so, is brought to trial and sent to prison - his career and prospects in ruins.

By making the problem of corruption one of his central themes, Achebe is faithfully reflecting the stresses and strains of society round about him; he is also fulfilling his promise to help in the regeneration of his country.

How to cure their country of its endemic bribery and corruption had been one of the main topics of discussion among Nigerian undergraduates during Obi's four years in London; and, ironically, Obi himself had tackled the problem with vigour:

Obi's theory that the public service of Nigeria would remain corrupt until the old Africans at the top were replaced by young men from the Universities was first formulated in a paper read to the Nigerian Students' Union in London. But unlike most theories formed by students in London, this one survived the first impact of homecoming.<sup>1</sup>

Achebe deliberately organises the plot so that Obi meets this type of dishonesty as soon as he arrives home. When the cargo vessel Sasa docks at Lagos, customs officials come aboard and deal with the handful of passengers in the comfort of their cabins. A young official, "almost a boy in fact," inspects Obi's baggage and declares that the duty on his

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid, p. 38

English radiogram will be five pounds.. Obi's reply is impressively swift: "Right," said Obi, feeling his hip-pockets. "Write a receipt for me." Expecting his compatriot to appreciate the situation and make the time-honoured gesture to an itching palm, the youth becomes confused. Then after scrutinising Obi for a few seconds, presumably unable to understand his ignorance, he says in pidgin English, "I can be able to reduce it to two pounds for you," When asked how, he replies, "I fit do it, but you no go get Government receipt."<sup>1</sup> Achebe wants to convince us that young Okonkwo, freshly arrived from England, is a man of the highest moral principles, for the tragedy of this book is the gradual collapse of these principles under the onslaught of Lagos corruption and personal adversity. Hence the emphasis on Obi's stern reaction to this first temptation to bribe as he arrives from England:

For a few seconds Obi was speechless. Then he merely said: 'Don't be silly. If there was a policeman here I would hand you over to him.' The boy fled from his cabin without another word.<sup>2</sup>

"Dear Old Nigeria," Obi muses, meaning that after four years his country has not altered. He waits for another

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 30

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 30



official to come, but none arrives until all the other passengers have been attended to. Such is the reward, Achebe seems to say, for those unwilling to abandon their principles.

Obi debates the problem of corruption whenever he meets his friend Christopher, a graduate from the London School of Economics. Over lunch one day he argues his belief that the Civil Service is corrupt because of the "so-called experienced" men at the top. Because they have no academic training to support their experience, they should be replaced, he feels, by the new generation of university men. To illustrate he chooses an example:

Take one of these old men. He probably left school thirty years ago in Standard Six. He has worked steadily to the top through bribery --an ordeal by bribery. To him the bribe is natural. He gave it and he expects it. Our people say that if you pay homage to the man on top, others will pay homage to you when it is your turn to be on top. Well, that is what the old men say.<sup>1</sup>

As for the younger generation, Obi remarks, with much innocence and not a little irony:

To most of them bribery is no problem. They come straight to the top without bribing any one. It's not that they're necessarily better than others; it's simply that they can afford to be virtuous. But even that kind of virtue can become a habit.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

As the narrative unfolds we are gradually shown that Nigerian society, or at least Lagos society (though the capital is probably intended as an image of the whole country) is suffering from corruption at almost every level. We have already encountered it in both the young customs official and in the typical "old African" civil servant Obi speaks about. As Achebe unobtrusively sketches in background details for the main thread of the narrative, the instances begin to multiply.<sup>1</sup> The Vice-President of the umuofia Progressive Union, for example, observes that if Obi had not been educated or, as he puts it, had not "known book," he would have suggested "seeing some of the men on the selection panel before Obi went for his interview. And when it is announced that Joshua Udo, a member of the Union, has been dismissed from the Post Office for sleeping while on duty, the Union approves a loan of ten pounds to him "for the . . . er . . . er the explicit purpose of seeking reengagement."<sup>2</sup> As proud representatives of their clan back home, the Union seems to accept all too easily the prevalent mode of behaviour in Lagos. An Ibo commentator has suggested that relaxation of

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<sup>1</sup>Achebe does not exaggerate the urgency of this problem. Writing in the Lagos Daily Times for June 27th., 1963 Mr. Tai Solarin, a headmaster and journalist, claimed that during 1959-60 in the Western Region alone 970,000 pounds in education grants disappeared in bribes and thefts.

<sup>2</sup>No Longer at Ease. p. 79.

the moral discipline practised at home stems from the clansman's belief that he is in a strange land, the local gods of which are not interested in him and therefore will not watch his ways; since local deities only know their own people, the clansmen is not in constant fear of divine reprisals.<sup>1</sup>

Obi's moral indignation is most strongly aroused by the extent to which his country's police force is corrupt. The form this corruption takes is illustrated in the kind of brief episode that Achebe handles so well. Shortly after his government interview, Obi travels home by passenger lorry to Umuofia in the Eastern Region. North of Ibadan two policeman stop the lorry to check the driver's papers. Evidently they are out of order for the driver's assistant approaches one of the policemen with an offer of two shillings. Obi's respectable dress and inquisitive gaze, however, make the offer unacceptable and the man is driven away with an indignant "What you want here? go Go way!" With the driver's particulars noted, the lorry moves off but stops again about a quarter of a mile further on. The driver remonstrates with Obi:

'Na him make I no de want carry you book people,' he complained . . . Why you put your nose for matter way no concern you? Now that policeman go charge me like ten shillings.'

It was only some minutes later that Obi realised why he had stopped. The driver's mate had run back to the policemen, knowing that they would be more amenable when there were no embarrassing strangers gazing at them. The man soon returned panting from much running.

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<sup>1</sup> See Two Dispensations, an M. A. thesis submitted to Queen's University by A. Uhiara, in 1964.

'How much they take?' asked the driver.  
 'Ten shillings,' gasped his assistant.  
 'You see now' he said to Obi, who was already beginning to feel a little guilty, especially as all the traders behind, having learnt what was happening, had switched their attacks from career girls to 'too know' young men.<sup>1</sup>

The incident deeply affects Obi:

What an Augean stable! he muttered to himself. Where does one begin? With the masses. Educate the masses? He shook his head. Not a chance there. It would take centuries. A handful of men at the top. Or even one man with vision--an enlightened dictator. People are scared of the word nowadays. But what kind of democracy can exist side by side with so much corruption and ignorance? Perhaps a half-way house--a sort of compromise.<sup>2</sup>

The problem, then, has very deep roots and its solution, the author suggests, is vital for the social and political health of his country. Corruption here is like a disease and Achebe emphasises its virulence by showing that even a man like Obi, with the highest ideals and the best intentions, can become its victim.

Directly linked with this, of course, is the whole network of difficulties an African hovering between the two dispensations must face. Achebe wants us to understand this, for apart from calling the attention of his own people to the ills of Nigerian society, he seems anxious that outsiders, too, should realise just how complex his country's problems are. Mr. Green's diagnosis (that the African is corrupt through and through because over countless centuries the worst climate in the world has sapped him mentally and physically) is a pathetic over

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

simplification which the whole book seems designed to show up. Hence Achebe's closing remarks on the downfall and imprisonment of Obi Okonkwo, which suggest that enlightenment has been intended for compatriots and outsiders alike:

Everybody wondered why. The learned judge, as we have seen, could not comprehend how and educated young men and so on and so forth. The British Council man, even the men of Umuofia, did not know. And we must presume that, inspite of his certitude, Mr. Green did not know either.<sup>1</sup> ....

One of the most attractive features of Achebe's style is its rich vein of proverbs and proverbial wisdom. Examine a literature's proverbs and a society's complete range of cultural attitudes and values can be revealed. For proverbs are like grains of wisdom containing the experience of countless generations and handed down as guidelines to life, sanctions for authority and guarantees of cultural homogeneity. Through them tradition is both seen and perpetuated; and when they fall into disuse it is a sign that a tradition, or indeed a way of life, is passing away. Industrial western society has little use now for the proverbs of an agricultural past; our signposts to conduct are to be found more in scientific laws or a sociologist's survey. The same, too, might happen in Africa as western influence increases

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 170

and it could well be an awareness of this that has encouraged Chinua Achebe to include in his novels so much of the wise thinking of his people--often in the form of popular proverbs and occasionally in the form of sage observations that have all the weight and tone of regular proverbs.

West Africa loves its proverbs; indeed it is a part of the world where men's lives still seem to be a movement from one proverb to the next. Among the Yoruba people alone it has been estimated there are 40,000 proverbs still in use. They are pointers to conduct, the weapons of debate and the means of appealing to tribal solidarity. Among the Ibos, a conversation might consist <sup>almost</sup> entirely of proverbs, as Achebe himself testifies:

Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs. among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.<sup>1</sup>

The elders particularly like to quote proverbs; having lived longer than the young, they possess a greater store of wisdom and see themselves as the natural guardians of the tribe's heritage. In modern Africa, however, they find it necessary to draw a useful distinction between knowledge and wisdom. Thus, in No Longer at Ease, after Obi has returned from England with his Honours degree, an elder (obviously illiterate) explains why he still feels competent to give

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<sup>1</sup>Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart, p. 4.

him advice:

You are very young, a child of yesterday.  
You know book. But book stands by itself  
and experience stands by itself. So I am  
not afraid to talk to you. <sup>1</sup>

In much the same vein, an elderly member of the Umuofia Progressive Union addresses the younger members: "You young men here, I want you to listen because it is from listening to old men that you learn wisdom." He goes on to offer the Union hereditary reasons for Obi's apparent callousness over his mother's death, observing that the father years before had been no better. The President of the Union is impressed with this and immediately sanctions it for the audience with some heavily proverbial observations:

'You see that,' said the President. 'A man may go to England . . . but it does not change his blood. It is like a bird that flies off the earth and lands on an ant-hill. It is still on the ground.'<sup>2</sup>

Before going to England an elder had felt it necessary to warn Obi not to rush into the pleasures of the world "like the young antelope who danced herself lame when the main dance was yet to come," an allusion Obi perfectly understands. Finally, the old men see themselves as guardians of the peace and in Arrow of God when the younger element is keen to fight and risk smashing the clan, the elders are a strong restraining influence, one of them observing, with powerful directness:

1 Nā Longer at Ease, p. 82

2 Ibid., p. 160

"The language of young men is always pull down and destroy; but an old man speaks of conciliation."

Proverbs in Achebe often function like images in other literature, to point up themes the writer happens to be exploring. Indeed they are more useful than mere images, for proverbs here are frequently images with a message. In Achebe they can point up themes and teach wisdom at the same time. The matter of clan solidarity is a case point. In all three novels this is a major concern, even, as in No Longer at Ease, when clan members are in strange territory. In unity there is security, and assistance during times of need, for the clansmen know that "He who has people is richer than he who has money." Even Obi, who has good reason to complain about the heavy demands of tribal loyalty, can preach eloquently on the need for solidarity to his fellow members of the Union, using a forceful combination of proverbial wisdom and familiar allusions:

'did not the psalmist say that it was good for brethren to meet together in harmony? Our fathers also have a saying about the danger of living apart. They say it is the curse of the snake. If all snakes lived together in one place, who would approach them? But they live every one unto himself and so fall easy prey to man.'<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the closing lines of Arrow of God, while offering

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 81



an explanation for the tragedy of Ezeulu, touch on this very subject of clan loyalty, and in doing so recall proverbial sayings handed down from the clan's forefathers:

Their god had taken sides with them against his headstrong and ambitious priest and thus upheld the wisdom of their ancestors--that no man however great was greater than his people; that no man ever won judgement against his clan.<sup>1</sup>

There is a strong tragic element in Achebe's writing for all three novels recount the downfall of their central character; Okonkwo in Things Fall Apart, Obi in No Longer at Ease and Ezeulu in Arrow of God. To illustrate this and the general pathos of man's situation in the world, the author employs proverbial sayings of strange power and beauty. Ezeulu, for instance, crushed under the blow of his son's death, reaches for a saying that will help to explain away or mitigate his sorrow:

They say a man is like a funeral ram which must take whatever beating comes to it without opening its mouth; only the silent tremor of pain down its body tells of its suffering.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, faced with the death of his mother, for whom he has the tenderest love, Obi realises that no matter how deeply affected he is, life must go on. His people say that "the start of weeping is always hard" and yet, he sadly reflects,

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<sup>1</sup>Chinua Achebe, Arrow of God, (London), 1964, p. 287

<sup>2</sup>No Longer at Ease, P. 167

"the most horrible sight in the world cannot put out the eye." And then, violating a proverb of his clan, he stoically observes, "The death of a mother is not like a palm tree bearing fruit at the end of its leaf, no matter how much we want to make it so."<sup>1</sup> Obi's brave efforts to bear up under misfortune run counter to a strong vein of fatalism in the novels that drives home time and again the inevitability of suffering, whether men accept it or not. In a picturesque illustration, Moses in Arrow of God tells his friends:

When suffering knocks at your door and you say there is no seat left for him, he tells you not to worry because he has brought his own stool.<sup>2</sup>

Nor does one calamity provide immunity from others to follow. Life, Achebe's people say, is not like that, for "Even while people are still talking about the man Rat bit to death Lizard takes money to have his teeth filed."<sup>3</sup> The most striking example of this fatalism, however, occurs in No Longer at Ease, where Obi, arguing with the Chairman of the Commission over the suicide at the end of Green's The Heart of the Matter, falls back on the proverbial wisdom of a village elder to

<sup>1</sup>No Longer at Ease, P. 167

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 104. The illustration is actually used to describe the coming of the white man, but to Moses' audience it is obviously a familiar way of looking at suffering.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., P. 282

embodise a point:

It's much too simple. Tragedy isn't like that at all. I remember an old man in my village, a Christian convert, who suffered one calamity after another. He said life was like a bowl of porridge which one sips a little at a time, world without end. He understood the nature of tragedy.

The proverbial saying has become an integral part of Achebe's style, underlining themes, carrying little charges of didacticism and adding great richness of colour to his narrative. He critic yet has accused Achebe of falling into mere sentimentousness, for the proverb is so integral and organic a part of his style. Instead they speak of his curiously level tone, his quiet economy and his unobtrusive method of creating atmosphere.

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Arrow of God, Achebe's third, and in many ways his most ambitious, novel, was published by Heinemann in 1964. Like Things Fall Apart, it reflects the life of an Ibo community in Eastern Nigeria, but it is set in the early twenties rather than the late nineteenth century. Achebe's decision to write a further novel about the past is quite deliberate, for we may recall that he has said he believes his art can contribute powerfully to Nigeria's "re-education and regeneration" and he particularly hopes that his historical novels will teach his readers that "their past -- with all its imperfections -- was not one long night of savagery from which the Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them." In the light of these remarks, it is also fair to assume that in Arrow of God Achebe is more concerned than ever before with addressing his African audience, and there is plenty of evidence to show that fewer allowances are made for the foreign reader. It is, therefore, a correspondingly more difficult book for the non-African reader to approach, though the obstacles are certainly not insurmountable.

At the heart of the narrative is Ezeulu, the pious and strongly independent Chief Priest of the villages of Umuaro. He is the priest of Ulu, a deity installed by the villages after their delivery from long persecution, and ranking above all other gods. Ulu is a powerful god as well as a protector and "destroys a man when his life is sweetest to him."<sup>1</sup> It falls to Ezeulu to serve him and ask him for favours:

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<sup>1</sup>Chinua Achebe, Arrow of God, p. 32.

Ulu, I thank you for making me see another new moon. May I see it again and again. May this household be healthy and prosperous. As this is the moon of planting may the six villages plant with profit.<sup>1</sup>

Since Ulu is all-powerful his wishes are sought in all clan activities, and when a group of clansmen led by Nwaka decide to make war on nearby Okperi, Ezeulu strives hard to forbid it precisely because he feels Ulu is not in favour of it. Indeed, Ezeulu has sense of justice enough to strongly assert his belief that the piece of land causing the dispute does not belong to Umuaro anyway:

It was Okperi who gave us a piece of their land to live in ... This is the story as I heard it from my father. If you choose to fight a man for a piece of farmland that belongs to him I shall have no hand in it.<sup>2</sup>

The dispute is finally resolved by Captain Winterbottom, the British District Officer, who is so impressed when Ezeulu speaks the truth at an enquiry into the affair that he decides to make him a Paramount Chief. Ezeulu's honesty, however, along with his opposition to the war and his decision to let his son Oduche be brought up as a Christian, causes a deep rift in the clan and Ulu's priest can only cling to his office with difficulty. Especially is he the target of abuse for Nwaka, a member of Idemili or the cult of the sacred python, a reptile which Ezeulu's Christian son has tried to kill.

When Ezeulu refuses to accept Winterbottom's offer, which is

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 18.

made with barbaric indelicacy, he is thrown into gaol and spends almost four weeks there. During his confinement he broods on the bitterness shown him by his enemies and dreams that his people are rejecting Ulu because he seems to be powerless against the white man. He sees himself as the Chief Priest whom the crowd begin "to push ... from one group to another. Some spat on his face and called him the priest of a dead god."<sup>1</sup> On his release he coldly plots to revenge himself on Umuaro; it will be a carefully prepared punishment and devastating in its effectiveness. He will be like an adder which "would suffer every provocation, it would even let its enemy step on its trunk; it must wait and unlock its seven fangs one after the other. Then it would be death to its tormentors."<sup>2</sup>

Conveniently, Ezeulu also comes to believe that Ulu himself wants to punish the people so that, as his priest, he is merely "an arrow in the bow of his god." Revenge finally comes with the Feast of the New Yam, marking the end of the old year and the beginning of the new. Four days after the appearance of the new moon which marks the appropriate date, Ezeulu has still not announced the Feast and no yams can be harvested until he does so. There is a grave danger of famine as the ripe yams lie unharvested in the earth but Ezeulu merely shrugs this off, calmly remarking, "The gods sometimes use us a whip!"<sup>3</sup> It seems, however, that Ulu is a

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 227.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 261.

most inscrutable god, for shortly after Ezeulu decides to announce the Feast and bring the crisis to an end, his favourite son, Obika, is cruelly taken from him. This crushes Ezeulu who cannot understand why Ulu has let it happen; he becomes insane and spends his last days in "the haughty splendour of a demented high priest."<sup>1</sup> But if this is Ulu's way of punishing his priest, the victory is only a pyrrhic one, for he is dismissed as Umuaro's deity and the clan falls into the welcome embrace of Mr. Goodcountry, a local Christian missionary.

Arrow of God is clearly intended to be a major development from No Longer at Ease and Things Fall Apart. There are signs in the book of an overall advance in boldness and confidence; Achebe feels confident enough to risk fairly long digressions, for example, to give a minute account of a long debate or the festive apparel of a young bride. The novel is physically bigger also, running to almost twice the length of its predecessors. Its scale is larger and it carries more abundantly the rich material of character, theme and background with which Achebe wants to impress his readers.

Ezeulu, though often a rather dull and priggish character, is intended as a more powerfully conceived figure than the protagonists of the previous novels. There is more attention paid to him because he is at the centre of clan life and his career suggests that Achebe has tried to create him on the lines of a tragic hero. And yet his domination of the scene is by no means complete, for Arrow of God is notable for the increased number

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 287.

of minor characters it portrays, a group who, more strongly than before, give the impression of a real society.

There is, too, Achebe's biggest attempt so far to portray the characters of white men, as though he is responding to a suggestion made at the 1961 African Writers Conference that white people can be a fit subject for African literature! Mr. Green in No Longer at Ease was a success mainly because he was an easily recognised coastal type. There are several European characters in Arrow of God, however, all differing slightly in rank and character. With Winterbottom and Clarke, Achebe makes an impressive effort to record the variety of attitudes possible for the white ruler in face of a largely unknown body of subjects. He shows, too, that he appreciates the climatic problems Europeans face -- the inability to sleep, the bouts of fever, the suffocation of mosquito nets. And yet, while genuinely appreciating the colonialists' hardships, Achebe repeatedly pokes fun at their idiosyncracies: at their concern, for example, not to lower themselves "in the eyes of the natives," at the threats to bar offenders from the club and at the odd but prevalent belief that dressing for dinner, although insufferably irksome, is a kind of "general tonic which one must take if one (is) to survive in this demoralising country."<sup>1</sup> Winterbottom especially is ridiculed. He describes the fairly ordinary dispute between Umuaro and Okperi as a "big savage war" and he then goes on to give a wildly inaccurate account of the events of the struggle. We see him as an uninformed official, faintly absurd in

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 39.



his ignorance. Significantly, too, the only white woman in the book is a "severe and unfeminine missionary doctor in charge of the hospital," whose collapse into panic and tears when Winterbottom becomes ill makes her look both ridiculous and, it is implied, immoral. Though interesting enough, the white portraits in the book are unsatisfactory, for by them Achebe loses much of his reputation for unbiased reporting and impressive freedom from bitterness.

Arrow of God, as a more ambitious venture than Achebe's previous novels, is largely a success; but the author's advance in confidence often brings him perilously close to failure; for while long digressions and set debates might have been acceptable from, say, Fielding, Achebe's strength so far has been his almost classical sense of balance, proportion and economy. The long debates over the war, however, the tedious coming and going from the prison at Okperi, an increased use of proverbs that borders on sententiousness and the rather unsatisfactory satire against the Europeans -- all these go some way towards undermining the qualities on which Achebe's stature as a novelist largely depends.

## Conclusion

This dissertation has attempted to offer an introductory survey of the new literature in English that is appearing in the Republic of Nigeria. The spurt of literary activity here that has marked the past decade has been helped on by such factors as increasing literacy, nationalism and political independence. More tangible influences have been the University of Ibadan, Mbari Writers Club, the journal Black Orpheus, African Universities Press and the germinal association with all these of several dedicated scholars, chief among whom is probably Mr. Ulli Beier.

Because a policy of cultural assimilation was not pursued in Britain's colonial territories, the chief characteristics of Nigerian writing differ sharply from those distinguishing the literature of French West Africa. Nigerian literature tends to be personal and reflective rather than public and strident in the manner of Négritude. The pace is steady, the thinking calm, the viewpoint realistic.

In a country where social change is deep-going and painful the writer is at an advantage, for there is so much to reflect, to say, to urge. Accordingly, poets, novelists and dramatists are revealing Nigeria to herself as only a writer can. Social stresses are recorded in both prose and verse with frankness and, at times, a good deal of moral indignation, though some writers (especially the poets) prefer to look inward and describe their own private world with its joys and tribulations.

Among the prose writers there is the strange position of Amos Tutuola, beloved abroad, neglected at home. His achievement is unique and will probably continue to be so, for national pride will almost certainly ensure that a world audience will never again be entertained by this kind of art. After Tutuola a window on the spirit world of Africa will be slammed shut for ever. It remains to be seen whether in his lifetime this strangely powerful writer will create a more conventional kind of prose form that can be handed on to Nigeria's second generation of writers.

At a time when it is unfashionable to preach anything, beyond weird doctrines of despair and gloom, Chinua Achebe is preaching enthusiastically about the novel and its use as an instrument with which to reform Nigerian society, restore self-esteem and cure its absurd sense of inferiority. He uses the novel to reconstruct a picture of a healthy traditional culture, a way of life that Africans can look back on with pride. He also crystallises for his African audience many of the problems which the current meeting of the two cultures has engendered, no doubt in the belief that a problem once isolated is a problem quickest solved. There are strong indications that Achebe with his measured lyricism is attempting to give English prose style a new kind of texture, wherein traditional wisdom and warm humanity can be readily woven. His maturity of vision, sense of vocation and obvious belief in labor limae suggest that Achebe could well become a writer of considerable stature.

The present survey has some obvious limitations. No discussion has been offered on drama, for example, a field in which Nigeria is very rich and in which Soyinka and Pepper Clark are doing a good deal of important work. Room has not been found for Cyprian Ekwensi either, a reluctant omission since he is his country's most prolific novelist. Nor has it been possible to examine in detail the experiments that are going forward in prose and verse - the Ijaw-based prose style of Okara's The Voice, for example, or the pidgin English poetry of Imoukhuede. It is hoped, nevertheless, that sufficient material has been offered to show that the Republic of Nigeria has young men who, in Gibbonian phrase, have read with taste, who think with freedom, and who write in a foreign language with spirit and elegance.

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