

Add to entry on T. M. ALUKO:

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T. M. Aluko

(14 June 1918-)

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Books:

One Man, One Wife (Lagos: Nigerian Printing and Publishing Company, 1959;

~~as T. Mofolorunso Aluko~~; revised edition, London; Ibadan, Nairobi.

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One Man, One Matchet (London: Heinemann, 1964; London: Heinemann ^{Educational Books} [African

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Kinsman and Foreman (London; Ibadan, Nairobi: Heinemann, 1966; London:

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His Worshipful Majesty (London, Ibadan, Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books [African Writers Series, 130], 1973);

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A State of Our Own (~~Ibadan~~, ^{London} ^{and} Basingstoke; ~~etc.~~ ^g Macmillan [M Novels Series], 1986);

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For four decades, T. M. Aluko has been one of the most productive, though most undervalued, of modern Nigerian novelists, and his six novels offer a distinctive insight into Nigerian society during the middle decades of this century. As early as the nineteen-forties, he received recognition for his short stories, but since then for much of his writing career critics have been almost uniformly hostile towards his satiric portraits of villagers and administrators, politicians and clergymen. He has never been a full-time writer; his primary occupation has been as a civil engineer--in the civil service, as a university professor, and in consultancy work--, and his books reflect the realism and perhaps the inevitable elitism of his special vantage-point; they certainly reflect a practical man's impatience with more theoretical commentators. His distanced irony, and his political scepticism, distinguish him from the cultural committedness general in writers of the immediate pre-Independence and post-Independence periods, and still seem to preclude any widespread acclaim for his writings from African critics. Though his last two novels have raised renewed political criticism, his major novels from the nineteen-sixties have in recent years

received increased critical attention, especially for their skillful control of style and tone, and it ought now to be much more possible to understand Aluko's development sympathetically, and to reassess the critical realism of his commentary on Nigerian politics and society.

Timothy Molofofunso Aluko was born in 1918, the son of a polygamous though church-connected family, at Ilesha, near Ife, in what was then the protectorate area within the Southern Provinces of Nigeria. He received his early education at a local church primary school, and his secondary schooling at Government College, Ibadan, recently founded on British "public school" lines to train a modern Nigerian leadership class. In 1939, he moved to Yaba Higher College, near Lagos, then the most advanced educational institution in Nigeria, and after graduation in 1942, he held posts as a junior engineer in the Public Works Department at Lagos and Ilorin.

It was in the nineteen-forties, a decade before most other modern Nigerian writers, that Aluko first came to notice as a fiction writer, through the short story contests sponsored by the British Council. From the contests came readings on Nigerian radio and his first publication,

"The New Engineer," a comic piece about a lazy road gang, in a British-edited anthology African New Writing (1947). When Aluko went to Britain in 1946, to study engineering and town planning at King's College, London, he contributed regularly to the Liverpool-based West African Review, and many of the recurring topics of his full-length novels appear in these early stories and essays, including satire on the local law-courts ("Silence in Court"), on public letter-writers and the uprooted culture of urban Lagos ("No Welcome for the Ghost"), and on the forced Britishness of government officials ("Art of Dentistry," and the cricket story "Strange Captain"). His important 1949 essay "The Case for Fiction" argued strongly for "stories and novels written by African writers with an essentially African background and atmosphere, and for an essentially African reading public." Aluko was prescient in recognizing the underlying practical questions that faced African writers, about limited publishing outlets and the choice between European and vernacular language; he called for more African literary magazines and, for reasons of national unification, leant towards English as the preferred medium, though he understood the theoretical difficulty of "rendering African thought in English."

In 1952, Aluko returned to Nigeria as a senior public works engineer, with tours in Oyo, Oshogbo, and Ikoyi, and in 1956 he became Town Engineer for the growing city of Lagos. His first book, One Man, One Wife (1959), dedicated "to the African writer of tomorrow" and "the great cause of African literature," was an historic landmark, the first modern Nigerian novel actually to be published by a Nigerian firm (though it was printed in Britain). It is set in the small village of Isolo, apparently in the nineteen-thirties, and the multiple plots all revolve around the clash, sharpened by a smallpox epidemic, between traditional Yoruba religion and the new religion of mission Christianity. The novel introduces a wonderful cast of village characters--the pastor, the old chief and village elders, the staunch churchman Bible Jeremiah, and most notably the semi-educated teacher and catechist, the rogue Royasin, who is chased from the village for adultery but flourishes in a nearby town as a public letter-writer, "Friend of the Illiterate and Advocate of the Oppressed."

Unlike most Nigerian novels of the Independence period, One Man, One Wife seemed strangely uncommitted in the tradition-modernization conflict. ^{its depiction of}

It is only in occasional incidents, like the storytelling under the Odan tree in the second chapter, that Aluko shows any identification with

traditional village culture; the worshippers of Shango and Shonponna, and the village Christians, are both shown as superstitious and manipulative, and traditional greeting forms as well as Christian hymns are quoted as falsifying experience. In his preface, Aluko had made the rather disingenuous disclaimer that "any seeming sarcasm on any . . . administration or religious movement" was "purely accidental," but his satire was nonetheless condemned by reviewers as "objectionable," "sensationalist," and "imperialist."

Aluko modified the book a little for its 1967 republication, but there remain unresolved conflicts within it, because the novel's symbolism pulls against its satire. Much of the symbolism is heavily, even heavy-handedly, pro-traditionalist, as for instance in the very self-conscious symbolic contrast between the village church as a bud still growing toward flowers and fruit, and the counter-image of the much older and more deeply-rooted Odan tree "inhabited by the god of the village," and in the contrast between the literal water that Shango brings to the village stream and the metaphorical water of life offered by the church. This pro-tradition imagery, however, seems unconvincing by comparison with the comedy.

There remain also unresolved problems in the book's ending, where a new Christian prophet preaches a minimally-syncretist religion under the Odan tree, and the runaway girl is saved by marriage to a local authority policeman. The first reviews now seem unduly harsh, and subsequent critics have pointed out also the traditional Yoruba roots of Aluko's broad satiric method in the novel, and his sharp ear for imitating the variety of English style among the different characters (the piety of the vicar, the exuberant unfairness of Royasin's newspaper article). The damaging difference between this first novel and Aluko's mature fiction is its limited focus on an increasingly oldfashioned village life, a life which evoked a conventional respect among those encouraging African fiction in the fifties, but to which Aluko no longer really belonged.

His next three novels, his major works, all gain by moving the focus from village life to the problems and preoccupations of Aluko's own educated but apolitical African elite. In this changed focus, he found his distinctive voice and theme. On Nigerian Independence in 1960, Aluko was appointed Permanent Secretary in the Western Ministry of Works and Transport, the highest administrative engineering post in his region.

His second novel, One Man, One Matchet (1964), follows the career of a new Nigerian District Officer as he attempts to implement central government tax and agricultural policy in the face of traditionalist obstruction. It is set in the early nineteen-fifties, and the hero Udo Akpan has to deal not only with an outbreak of cocoa disease, but also with a self-serving political agitator, Benja-Benja, who turns the local Oba and elders against him. The about-face of government policy over the cocoa disease raises obvious parallels to changes in colonial government attitudes to nationalist politicians; the parallel becomes explicit in Akpan's closing lesson from Benja-Benja's dishonesty, that "whatever brand of democracy we import into this country we must make sure that we sift out the seed of the disease that will otherwise choke to death" the new freedom. Aluko clearly suggests that the independence process had favored corrupt politicians rather than the selfless, apolitical administrative elite like Akpan, who have to deal with actual policy implementation.

The book's strength lies not only in the comic exuberance with which it portrays Benja-Benja's exploitation of his supporters' greed and local pride, but in the much more subtle irony with which it explores the constraints under which Akpan works in colonial administrative procedures

and language. Moreover, the novel is not wholly one-sided. Akpan's problems are partly of his own making as well as of Benja's. Indeed, a recent Marxist critic, James Booth, has paid tribute to the complex realism in Aluko's analysis of Akpan's relation to the Ipaja villagers; Booth argues that Aluko's elite perspective reveals the political contradictions of the modernizing process and so makes them available for reinterpretation. Even at the end of the book, as Aluko moves from fiction to direct political debate, Akpan must conclude with a question rather than an answer: "How can we make the whole thing operate with efficiency? How?"

Aluko retained his focus on the new Nigerian district-level administrators in his next novel, Kinsman and Foreman (1966). The hero, Titus Oti, has been posted as the first Nigerian District Engineer to his home town, where he discovers that his father's cousin Simeon, the public works foreman, has been taking bribes and fiddling his expenses. A useful comparison is with Chinua Achebe's novel No Longer at Ease (1960), which also depicts a Nigerian civil servant facing traditional kinship obligations; Aluko's hero is much stronger and more effective than Achebe's. Titus is squarely against speculation and deceit, but like

Achebe's Obi, his dilemmas are those of conflicting social pressures rather than simply of moral choice--not only the head of his family, but his widowed mother, his parish clergyman, and his former school-friend Chris the lawyer, all want him to condone and protect his kinsman's crimes. Titus, in fact, suffers a nightmare crisis of psychological identity when he goes on a tour of his District and stops at a rest-house where years ago a colonial officer had been killed; he comes to believe he is himself literally under attack, and though his breakdown is brief, it reinforces another of the book's powerful recurrent images, that of a furiously^g driven, badly^g/maintained, and wildly out-of-control mammy-wagon (truck), rather hopefully named Safe Journey, which Titus as District Engineer is meant to inspect for road-worthiness, but whose dangers he can do little about. The engineer's breakdown, and the truck's criminal disrepair, are crucial images for Aluko's attitude in the mid-sixties to Nigerian politics. His administrator can plan, with great difficulty, the building of roads and bridges, but he has little control over the modern Nigeria that will use them.

Indeed, the novel leaves a very negative picture of the future. In

this book, unlike Aluko's first, the local prophetic sect, the alaso teles, can offer only psychic escape, not cultural synthesis, with their apocalyptic promise of a sudden end to this conflict-ridden world. The modern central government is shown as weak and unrealistic in controlling crime, when Simeon is twice cleared of his embezzlement, once in court and again before an internal Commission of Inquiry. And the attitude of Westerners to modern Africa is satirized when some Chicago benefactors decide, after reading an illustrated article in Time or Life, to endow the village church as the centre for a new black theology. Titus himself, like Udo in the previous novel, can only stick with his job, and hope to find psychic integration in facing realities, though the lawyers and contractors seem to flourish unchecked.

Aluko's fourth novel, Chief the Honourable Minister (1970), reflects Aluko's move into more senior and politicized civil service postings, and the politicization of the civil service itself, but it also reflects the break-up of his civil service world in Nigeria's double military coups of 1966. Following the coups, Aluko had taken retirement from the civil service, and started a second career as a university lecturer, briefly at Ibadan and then at the University of Lagos; indeed, in 1968-69, he was out

of Nigeria completely, studying in Britain at the University of Newcastle, where he received an M.Sc. in public health engineering. Unlike any other of Aluko's books, Chief the Honourable Minister is set not in the provinces, but in central government, in the capital of a fictional new African nation, "Afromarcoland," and its focus is the gradual breakdown of civilian rule and the inevitable coming of a military coup, as had happened in Nigeria in 1966.

Aluko's book clearly challenges comparison with Achebe's book on the same theme A Man of the People (196⁶), yet the differences between the two works are as significant as the similarities. Achebe's hero is an intellectual outside the government, and Achebe's politician is a villain, a blatantly opportunistic rogue; by contrast, Aluko's central character, Alade Moses, is both intellectual and politician at once, an ex-schoolmaster who has been brought into the government on Independence, and switched from his real field of education to become Minister of Works (switched, that is, from theory and hope to the pressing practicalities of "nation-building"). Moses is drawn by his supporters and colleagues not only into political trade-offs, bid-rigging, and election fraud, but also

into a disturbing rapprochement with traditional culture, into secret blood oaths scientifically administered with a hypodermic syringe, and a chieftancy initiation that is purely for political propaganda. Unlike Achebe, who uses a first-person narrative to get us inside the experience of his politically ^galienated protagonist, Aluko uses the more objective third-person voice, to chart, almost clinically, the way weakness, rather than wickedness, led to Alade Moses's fall from power. There are nice satiric cameos, too, of the way both expatriate and African civil servants get caught up in collusion with their new political masters.

The problem once again with Aluko's tragi-comic view of politics is in its perspective on the future, or sense of an ending; the main narrative of the novel rests on an ironic distance from the political rhetoric of its characters, implying at best a troubled outcome, while his final chapter, where the new military ruler announces his coup on national radio, seems to invite an unironic seriousness and firmness of political program. This disjuncture of modes is clearly of historical significance, in assessing the initial attitude of African elites to the military coups of the sixties, as well as of literary significance, in indicating Aluko's

final reluctance to relinquish his early idealistic hopes for a totally ironic detachment.

Certainly, the book marks the end of a major phase in Aluko's writing career, for his three subsequent novels turn away from mainstream questions of political development to focus instead on smaller-scale case-studies in Nigerian affairs; in the early nineteen-seventies, Aluko served as a civilian State Commissioner of Finance, but the novels appear to evade any direct comment on politics at that level and of that period. Indeed, younger Nigerians in the early seventies fiercely criticized his "timidity" and "refusal to take moral stands." His later books, too, avoid even the conditional and troubled sense of hope that Aluko had maintained in his three novels from the sixties. Yet even these later books may, in light of the indirect and symbolic approach to political commentary used in One Man, One Matchet and Kinsman and Foreman, be read as commentary on the contemporary state of the Nigerian nation.

In His Worshipful Majesty (1973), Aluko steps back dramatically in time, to the early nineteen-fifties, and returns his focus to the local level, but with some interesting differences from the early novels. The book deals with the introduction in 1952 of the Western Region's new Local

Government Act, which was intended to set up modern democratic local councils alongside the traditional structure of chiefs and elders, which had formerly been protected under the colonial policy of indirect rule. Local government reform was a small-scale version of the larger general problem of the relocation of power as traditional societies modernize, and the novel dramatizes quite skillfully the inevitable clashes of two incompatible political patterns. Some critics have argued that in this book, Aluko shows a new sensitivity to the values of traditional Yoruba culture, and certainly his picture of the new council chairman, the Lagos lawyer Morrison, satirizes the outsider's ignorance of local tradition and shows him having to learn about it. The book dwells too, at much greater length than earlier ones had done, on the ceremonial grandeur as well as the stubborn resistance to change of the traditional ruler, the Alaiye. But this change of attitude to traditional culture is partly one of point-of-view, rather than of basic value. Aluko tells the story through the eyes of Kale Roberts, who combines the posts of secretary to the Alaiye and to the new local council, a man with a deep investment in both worlds, comic in his self-interested efforts not to drop between the old and new stools;

Kale's account must be read as self-justification, rather than as objective narrative. Indeed, some of the novel's satire seems to argue that modern educated Nigerians can never recover the traditional culture they have lost; lawyer Morrison's new-found interest in local tradition seems merely diplomatic, and his ultimate fate (madness, and then death after being administered a traditional cure) is hardly encouraging. The very length and number of the Alaiye's speeches make it difficult for the reader to stand securely outside the traditionalist point of view, but the plot of the novel shows the Alaiye's resistance to change as stubborn and selfish, rather than heroic. Insofar as lawyer Morrison is a symbol of modern government, a government that seemed by the seventies to have broken down and gone mad, the novel would seem to argue for firmer and more committed modernization, and against renewed deference to cultural tradition. In this small, good-humoured, often comic case-study of local reform, Aluko is concerned to explore the human complexity of social change, but he never questions its inevitability or necessity.

For the remainder of the nineteen-seventies, Aluko returned to his teaching post at Lagos, and his sixth novel, Wrong Ones in the Dock (1982),

is set in that city. He earned a Ph.D. from the University of Lagos in 1976, with a dissertation on biodisc methods of urban sewage disposal, and retired, as an Associate Professor, in 1979. The novel is a thriller about the Lagos law courts, and the injustices caused by an antiquated British-style legal system that is breaking down under the sheer pressures of African urban life. The dedication, "To Jacob, whose needless suffering inspired the writing of this novel," suggests that the initial impulse for the book was simply journalistic and reformist, to tell the story of a wrongful arrest for murder; it takes the unlucky suspects, Jonathan and Paul, twenty months of suffering and anguish before their friends can prove their innocence and regain their freedom.

The narrator of the novel is an educated Nigerian, much like Aluko himself, with social ties to influential lawyers and the police, so that, through his eyes, the reader, unlike the suspects, fully understands the excruciatingly slow and unpredictable legal process through which the case must go. The suspects and their family are much less educated than the narrator, and the crime was committed in a crowded lower-class urban housing development, where the population is constantly shifting and where witnesses are both hard to find and reluctant to come forward; the police

and the lawyers have no understanding of the urban culture in which such domestic violence occurs, nor much interest in the human suffering their legal process causes. Both the prisons and the courts are shown to be corrupt and inefficient.

In the climax of the novel, several suspects die from suffocation in an unairconditioned British-style police van, as they are shuttled backwards and forwards from court to prison; Jonathan and Paul survive, and are eventually released, but Jonathan's health and life have been ruined. The police-van incident forms a fitting symbol for the novel's attitude to the Nigerian legal system, but it also stands as a symbol for the larger frustration and despair Aluko projects about Nigerian government and society. Only in the rather powerless human decency of the narrator himself do any real positives emerge from the novel.

Aluko's most recent work, A State of Our Own (1986), focuses on the multiplication of state governments within the Nigerian federal structure, but it places the responsibility for governmental inefficiency less on inherited colonial structures than on the individuals who want to change those structures for ultimately selfish purposes. The book

describes the plans, and lobbying campaign, of a group of ambitious faculty members at the University of Sogal ("Unisog") to set up a new state in their home region; not coincidentally, this will also create not only a new set of openings for cabinet ministers, civil servants, and state assemblymen, but also a new university, where they can all be full professors. The book details their caucuses, fundraising techniques, and their employment of an extravagant American-style lobbying firm, as well as their growing mutual distrust as they come to realize the full implications and costs of getting their proposed state approved in a federal system. Their own students at Unisog riot in protest against the new state, and the commission of inquiry into the protests allows Aluko to put forward, through the student leaders, a remarkable indictment of the shortsightedness, greed and ambition of the novel's main characters; indeed, the first-person narrator, Moses Erinosh, a low-level university administrator who had hoped to become Registrar of the new university, is increasingly persuaded by the arguments against the new state.

The novel's message seems to be that only the breakdown of political order can make the educated elite face up to political and economic

realities. It is, again, an almost wholly negative message. At the end, symbolically, Moses leaves his office, where the new state had been planned; "enough was enough," and his resolution is firm ("I was through with the movement and for what the movement stood"). But he has "nowhere in particular in mind" to go to, and he wanders "purposefully" towards the library, before turning down towards the foreshore. The problems of ambition and factionalism within the university parallel those in state-level politics; indeed, through the selfishness and self-importance of the Unisog faculty, Aluko can ~~miniaturize~~ ^{miniaturize,} and so make absurd, the initially more stirring and plausible self-importance of politicians. As an indictment of elite selfishness, the novel is detailed and absorbing, but it will inevitably be criticized for the bleak political prospect it offers.

Aluko's achievements can now be seen in much clearer perspective. Though his first six books all received the accolade of inclusion in the standard Heinemann African Writers Series, they have remained rather marginal to the canon of modern African literature. Several of them received scathing criticism from their original reviewers, initially for what was labelled their "abusive" attitude to traditional Yoruba culture,

and latterly for a blinkered, "civil service" view of Nigerian life, where Aluko's inside knowledge of the Public Works Department leads to passages like "limp xeroxes of contracts and tenders." In the early nineteen-seventies, too, younger writers questioned Aluko's ties with the Nigerian governmental establishment, and projected their distrust onto the novels: "he has held office till now," wrote one, "more like an instrument than a dynamic person . . . one searches his novels in vain for the high moral seriousness . . . of committed artists." Even critics sympathetic to his kind of satire have sometimes seen him as merely a "facile and witty writer . . . a gadfly without a sting," though such criticisms could hardly be brought against his dark later novels.

But alongside these criticisms there has also been continuing appreciation, both for his social satire and for his developing skill in handling tone and style. ~~Oladele Taiwo, for instance, praises Aluko's realism as establishing "a relevant link between tradition and modern experience," and both Taiwo and Ayo Banjo have documented Aluko's "technical sophistication" in handling Nigerian English across "a much wider range of linguistic activities than one finds in many another~~

~~Nigerian novelist.~~ From his work as a whole, moreover, there emerge recurring images, of lonely protagonists and nightmare-like breakdowns, of rooted and transplanted trees, of health and disease and contagion, of water and streams and rains, that suggest behind the surface satire a deeper and more poetic imaginative vision.

As time recedes from the immediate topics of Aluko's political satire, and his novels become less contemporary, critics and readers may perhaps appreciate more fully the less time-bound qualities of this tragi-comic vision and reevaluate Aluko's place in Nigerian literature. In the meantime, however, his most recent books remain unabashed in their dark polemic satire on contemporary issues; political questions seem likely therefore to remain central, as debate continues about Aluko's brand of critical realism and the insights it can offer into the contradictions of contemporary Nigeria.

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