

The Legacy of "Lumumbisme"

James Stock

La Pensée Politique de Patrice Lumumba, edited by Jean Van Lierde (Présence Africaine).

THIS VOLUME makes tragic reading. Jean Van Lierde, Catholic trade unionist, founder of the Belgian "Amis de Présence Africaine" and trusted friend of Patrice Lumumba, has assembled almost all Lumumba's available speeches, conferences and texts from the time of the 1st All African Peoples' Conference (December, 1958) until his murder in January, 1961. The cumulative impact is practically unbearable—and bitterly ironic. For Lumumba, whose true "dictatorship" was that of the word, of persuasion, of reason, was overwhelmed and destroyed by a crisis where the word became ineffectual, where panic, irrationality and blind instinctiveness reigned. Mutineers, *colons*, trusts, tribesmen exceeded each other in their criminal lapses, each responding as their limited consciousness and interests dictated. Lumumba remained faithful to his universal and abstract vision; his ultimate optimism was unshaken to the end. "En avant, citoyens et citoyennes, pour la construction d'un Congo uni, fier et prospère. Un avenir radieux pointe à notre horizon. Vive la République Indépendante et Souveraine du Congo!"—so concludes his last message, recorded shortly before his death.

Yet this defiant confidence, naive and voluntarist as it was, explains precisely the danger which Lumumba constituted. Lacking an articulated political doctrine, devoid of any economic programme, Lumumba still posed an irreducible threat to the post-colonial system envisaged by Belgium: in him we can recognise the explosive and genuinely revolutionary significance of authentic anti-colonial nationalism and pan-Africanism. It was this combination of certain absolutely firm principles with a lack of conventional political "sophistication" which gave Lumumba his unusually representative quality; he personifies a moment of the African revolution in its painful discovery of its own contradictions, tasks and real possibilities.

HIS POLITICAL THOUGHT was striking both in the rapidity of its evolution under the pressure of events and in its consistent



autonomy. In 1956, Lumumba still voiced the partial and illusory project of the *évolués* for a Belgo-Congolese *Communauté*; at that date both Ileo and Kasavubu occupied apparently more advanced positions. By the beginning of 1959, however, Lumumba had transformed the co-ordinates of Congolese nationalism with the founding of the MNC, the first supra-ethnic party, and with the recognition of the necessarily pan-African dimension of the Congo's struggle for national independence. Throughout 1959 and early 1960, there was a steady radicalisation in his formulations and demands as Belgian manoeuvres became increasingly transparent to him; simultaneously, he was engaged in the desperate race to organize and extend the MNC throughout the Congo and to co-ordinate its action with that of the many regional, minority and client parties which mushroomed at this period. The Conference of Luluabourg, the vigorous protests against the imprisonment of Kalonji in August 1959 (this was after the secession of the Kalonji tendency within the MNC), the presentation of a common platform at the *Table Ronde* discussions in Brussels, the formation of the *Cartel Lumumba*, the struggle against federalism, the efforts to establish a firm coalition government of national

unity—all these initiatives for a united nationalist action reveal Lumumba's primordial emphasis on the interests of the new nation.

The postulate of a genuinely independent Congolese nation was Lumumba's core idea: unswerving loyalty to this concept of a free Congo (and by extension of a free Africa) accounted at once for his impermeable moral and political integrity and for his practical flexibility and open-mindedness. His political temperament was Jacobin. Lumumba, the *évolué*, inherited the European revolutionary tradition (his speeches are peppered with references to the French, American, Belgian, Russian revolutions), with whose values he contested colonialism; but as a Congolese and as an African, he interpreted it in terms of his faith in his people's past and his aspirations for their future. The Congo would be African. The construction of the nation was to be an *autonomous unifying process*. The Belgian Congo, Lumumba perceived, was a concentrate of divisions, a complex of micro-communities, culturally, geographically, economically and socially atomised; these interests could and must be reconciled in a common loyalty. The Nation was to be history's annealing agent. Thus, Lumumba's nationalist party, the Mouvement National Congolais, was authentic and representative in its rejection of metropolitan controls and divisions. Created not at the instigation of one or other metropolitan party, avoiding the quagmire of clerical/anti-clerical strife, the MNC aimed to unite tribes, denominations and political tendencies through its positive action for emancipation and independence.

WHY WAS THIS ASPIRATION revolutionary? Because, as Lumumba swiftly came to recognise, division had not only constituted the essence of the system of colonial domination but was further intended to assure the new order, neo-colonialism. The dramatic rapidity of Lumumba's radicalisation derived from the logic of the process of "decolonisation" itself. Patriotic and acute, Lumumba was one of the first lucid victims of neo-colonialism. His dangerous merit lay in the rejection of the neo-colonial compromise, against which he tried to mobilise all African leaders. The pan-Africanism, which at Accra had merely implied the strategic solidarity of freedom fighters engaged in similar struggles, now became for him an urgent and concrete imperative. "We know the West's objective," he said in his opening address to the Leopoldville Pan-African Conference, convened at the height of the desperate struggle for the Congo's future. "Yesterday it divided us at the level of

tribes, clans and chieftainships. Today — because Africa has freed itself — it wants to divide us at the level of states." Lumumba, as prime minister of a juridically independent state in the heart of Africa, had come up against an unsuspected, occult political geography which bore little relation to formal frontiers — a ramifying network of international big capital whose agents penetrated governments and international institutions, bought and sold ministers and effectively applied new and more sophisticated forms of domination. Lumumba's observation that the Congo problem was the problem of all Africa was not a rhetorical figure: it was profound and accurate.

CONSCIOUS OF THE IMMENSITY of the obstacles facing Lumumba, therefore, we should hesitate to condemn him for the uncertainties and lacunae in his thought, the errors in his practice. These are amply discussed in Sartre's eloquent preface to the volume: over-concentration on certain formal problems of political structure, naive faith in centralisation, absence of any serious economic policy, fundamental illusions about the social base for his programme, extraordinary trust in his associates. But it should be recalled that the situation had escaped his control too quickly for him to be able to develop the organisational, programmatic and ideological elements already revealed in these texts. He favoured a unified party which recognised the rights of internal tendencies, but was compelled *force majeure* to adopt cartel and coalition types of organisation. Again, his social programme clearly would have devoted great attention to the rehabilitation of women and unemployed, to rural renovation and accelerated education. He constantly stressed that independence did not entail a magical solution to economic difficulties, that work was indispensable: "gold will not drop from the heavens". And there is little doubt that he would have moved towards more overtly socialist positions as the options revealed themselves more starkly. But, as Sartre remarks, in politics what is necessary is not always possible.

Lumumba died before these ambiguities could be resolved. His legacy, "lumumbisme", is not so much an articulated doctrine to be inferred by picking through his various statements as a basic complex of principles — the primacy and autonomy of the Nation, inseparably linked with genuine pan-Africanism, non-alignment and rejection of externally introduced divisions, fundamental commitment to a more humane social order. The struggle to realise these objectives will assume new forms, but Lumumba's writings will remain a constant point of reference.

The Evidence of Africa's History

Len Bloom

Africa in Time Perspective: A Discussion of Historical Reconstruction from Unwritten Sources by Daniel F. McCall. Boston University Press and Ghana University Press. Distributed by O.U.P. 25s. 0d.

ACCORDING TO THE colonial powers, colonised peoples never had a past, a discoverable history, until the clever colonisers arrived. Indeed, the arguments for colonialism often deny that the colonised peoples are people at all: they are "natives" or "aborigines". Toynbee in his *A Study of History* suggests why this is so. When "westerners call people 'natives' . . . we see them as wild animals infesting the country in which we happen to come across them, as part of the local flora and fauna and not as men of like passions with ourselves . . . We may exterminate them or . . . domesticate them . . . but we do not begin to understand them."

Then comes the end of the colonial regime and there is a flood of researchers from "the west", and the argument that "Africa had no history" becomes more sophisticated. It takes the form that much of the sources of Africa's history are unwritten, and therefore historical reconstruction of a journey into the unknown along paths strewn with methodological boulders.

MCCALL'S *Africa in time-perspective*, based upon a series of lecture given at University College of Ghana in 1961, is one of the most up-to-date and persuasive attempts to assess "some of the problems implicit in any attempt to discover the history of Africa, a part of universal history which is still largely unwritten". Here two problems are intimately linked,



the answers to which will depend upon the historian's view of the nature of his subject. First, McCall emphasises that the problems of historical study in Africa are no different from those in other parts of the world, and if we managed to reconstruct much of the histories of "the Scythians, Huns, Celts, Finns, Balts, Iberians, Etruscans and other peoples who had no writing", or who left little straight documentary evidence, then there is not much reason coyly to shy from the study of Africa's past. Secondly, McCall sees one of the tasks of history "to help the individual to define his personality: to see himself in the stream of humanity. For a nation as well . . ." This view demands that the historian treats the history of Africa just as he would that of any other place; as a part of the history of the world, and not as though it were a peculiar place with its own peculiar need for its own peculiar understanding.

MCCALL'S BOOK covers a wide range of kinds of evidence that the modern historian can use, and it shows how the modern historian may have to be a master of far more disciplines than that of the conventional interpretation of documents. He must be like a scientific detective: a scrap of cigarette ash, a few smears of grease, a cleat of dried mud and a half a used bus ticket, and he has a shrewd picture of the criminal.

The historian must make use of the evidence of archeology, folklore, myth and tradition; language; social anthropology; food and food production; zoology, biology, and the distribution of diseases; art; the technical means of measuring time such as counting tree-

"Adikra, Ashanti patterns carved from gourds to stamp textiles; each has an esoteric meaning. The upper one, called *Obi nka obi* (One person doesn't bite another) enjoins social harmony; the lower is said by J. B. Danquah, (*The Akan Doctrine of God*, London, 1944, p. 93) to represent a war captain. The progress of one form into another is, to me, an illustration of process." CHAPTER NINE *Process in Nature, Society and History*

rings, and Carbon 14 dating. Barely a generation ago few of these methods were widely used. Now students of Africa's past are using them to plot and trace the astonishingly complex, involved and mobile history of African societies. They are showing, what has often been denied, that the past of Africa has been as rich culturally, as evolved socially, and, until very recent times, as advanced technologically as anywhere else in the world. The social, economic, medical, intellectual and social history of Africa is emerging rapidly, and McCall suggests that "this generation of African historians has the opportunity of pioneering in the use of unwritten sources, as not so long ago social and economic historians and others pioneered".

"New strategies of history" are demanded in Africa, mostly based upon the need for co-operation between different types of method, and new lights on Africa's past are emerging. The partition of Africa is not yet one hundred years old, but it caused the destruction of many social boundaries and replaced them by lines drawn on a map at the whim of colonial grabbers. Now we are reconstructing the cultural regions, and discovering the culture changes that have been taking place behind the rigid artificial barriers imposed by the colonial powers.

The history of language, for example, is a novel means of finding out how people lived. We can infer about early Africa that its peoples "lived in an ecological setting in which the elephant and antelope, the baobab and palm, and the grey parrot were to be found. Apparently an open forest. They cultivated . . . millet, sorghum and rice . . . groundnuts, beans, melons, pumpkins and bananas. They had cattle, sheep, goats, chicken and the dog. They used iron, hoes, adzes, knives, spears, bows and canoes. They wore clothes, put salt on their food, and drank beer. They used cowrie shells . . . They were governed by chiefs and ministered to by diviners." This can be seen by tracing the forms and content of languages over the continent, and suggests that pre-colonial Africa was a lively, cultivated, well-organised and by no means "primitive" place.

McCall's book eloquently and soberly insists that the historical problems of Africa are basically the same as those of other continents, and can be solved by the same techniques. McCall is objective, sympathetic with the difficulties of the historian in Africa, and practical in advocating how history can be improved if historians with different points of view can be induced to co-operate even more.

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McCall's book advocates that we must explore the past in order to understand the present and to try to thread our way through the labyrinths of the future. One of the tragedies of much of the teaching and research in S. Africa is that it is (consciously or unconsciously) rooted firmly in the past in order to excuse the greed, muddle and mischief

of the present—and to tamely retreat from the present.

McCall writing from tiny, struggling Ghana has shown us in South Africa how we may encourage the teaching and study of history, not as a narrow ethnocentric discipline, but as part of the history of Africa, and further, of the world.

Literature and Life

John Clare

A Selection of African Prose—Volume I. Traditional Oral Texts. Compiled by W. H. Whiteley. (Oxford University Press.) R2.10.

Somali Poetry—An Introduction. B. W. Andrzejewski and I. M. Lewis. (Oxford University Press.) R3.

THE OBJECT OF THIS SERIES, according to the editors, is not only to conserve the oral tradition but to "relate African literature to African life". It is hoped that the conservation of the old will give contemporary writers a tradition to draw on and also provide a basis for future literary studies of Africa. In the matter of relating literature to life, it is interesting to note that the volume on Somali poetry was edited not by anyone with a special knowledge of literature but by a social anthropologist and a linguist.

The Nigerian, Chinua Achebe, in his foreword to the anthology of traditional oral texts, rightly warns against the modern, self-conscious tendency to try to "salvage bits of the African heritage before an imminent cultural darkness". This must result in a collection of curiosities of no literary merit and of interest only to scholars and, perhaps, those more fanatical exponents of "négritude" and that curious phenomenon the "African personality".

The difficulty of distinguishing between what may or may not rightly be termed literature is freely admitted by Mr. Whiteley in his introduction to the prose anthology. He goes on to point out that translation must both convey the spirit of the original and stand in its own right as literature. In this reviewer's opinion much of Mr. Whiteley's material is of no literary value whatsoever and is on the contrary unrewarding and tedious. Inclusion in this volume may well have secured its conservation, may even have illustrated some little known aspect of "African life", but as a contribution to the African literary tradition its value—in spite of appeals to "indi-

genous African standards"—remains strictly nil.

Many of the stories included in the volume bear much the same relation to literature as a 10-line synopsis of the "plot" of the play bears, say, to "Macbeth". In these cases it is important to appreciate that there is probably a very similar difference between the written version of the story and the oral. Changes in the quality of the narrator's voice, movements, facial expressions, would all compensate for the bareness of the narrative. It is this bareness which prompts a comparison with the contrast between a synopsis of the plot and the play itself.

But the best stories in the collection all satisfy that primitive fascination the well-told tale has exercised over man since time immemorial. Remember Scheherazade whose life depended night after night on her ability to keep the king intrigued until dawn—that precisely is the quality of the best of these tales and readily explains why so many of them have come to be handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation.

IT WOULD APPEAR that the Somali Republic is a poet's dream. As literally the only channel of national communication, poetry has an important social function to fulfil. Acting as newspaper, radio, television and cinema, it must bring instruction and amuse to a widely scattered population. Thus essential to any political party that wants to get its "line" across is a competent poet. As the rigorous requirements of strict alliteration are fundamental to Somali poetic composition, the definition of competence is extremely exacting. For example if the alliterative sound of a poem is the consonant g, a poem of 100 lines must contain 200 words beginning with g. Naturally one of the results of this is often a certain obscurity—a factor which the editors in their introduction explain away with much charm and resourcefulness: "For the Somalis listening to poetry is thus not only an artistic pleasure but provides them with the fascinating intellectual exercise of decoding the veiled speech of the poet's message." Which makes Somali poetry pretty modern after all.

Another result of the demands of alliteration is the conservation of a large vocabulary of archaic words which, though they may be known to the nomads of the interior, are more or less Dutch to the younger generation of townsmen. But the advantage of having this stock of words to draw on is that in a rapidly changing world the purity of the language can be maintained. As new ideas and concepts arise archaic words are restored and foreign

borrowing is avoided.

But perhaps the most notable result of the rigid alliteration is that the lines have a rhythm which makes them easily remembered—an important consideration if the poem is a medium of propaganda and must pass from mouth to mouth. Bound up with the question of rhythm is the fact that the poems are generally chanted or sung and often accompanied by handclapping and drumming. This link with music is worth insisting on because European poets and critics today are concerned to point out that it is to music that all poetry aspires and consequently bewail the current divorce between the two.

None of the poems included in the volume has previously been translated nor, with one or two exceptions, have they been committed to writing—the Somali language having no official or generally accepted orthography. The lengthy introduction on the “social and cultural setting” and the inclusion of some poems not for any intrinsic value but on the grounds that they “illuminate” some basis of Somali life, though valuable, does emphasise that this is not simply a collection of poems to be enjoyed for their own sake. As a lively introduction to life in a little known part of the continent this is a really admirable and absorbing work.

changed the people of *Things Fall Apart*. And so the total feeling left with the reader of Achebe's novels is one of cumulation, of expansion and deepening of our knowledge of the way of life that is past and still passing.

I wish publishers would stop emphasising in the blurbs of their jackets the stereotyped phrase “conflict between the old and the new”. I think also that the cover design of this novel, in its concentration on the all-be-it beautifully drawn python, puts a wrong emphasis on the novel. It is this type of approach that leads to the equally stereotyped adverse criticism about the lack of concern among our novelists with characters. It is more significant to watch ordinary and normal people reacting to heightened situations than to see the divagations of hypersensitive characters over the ordinary events of life. And what Achebe has given us in *Arrow of God* is a host of recognisable people with normal reactions from which we learn “the directions of men's souls”.

AND IT MIGHT be suggested here, before the usual conflicts arise, that this is not a sociological novel. The writer's present is always in the past, and the proximity of that past is not to be judged in terms of time lapse but in the author's ability to enter into the spirit of the period in which his story is set. Here again Achebe achieves success and handles his material with a deep-felt realism devoid of nostalgic idealisation. We are presented with a society that is dignified, communal and deeply religious, different from but not inferior to our own today. But this society is also shown to have its rivalries and pettiness between wives of a polygamous marriage, between children of different mothers looking for the inheritance of their father's powers, between individuals and deities claiming the leadership of the community, between sections of the village seeking precedence.

There are questions one still wants to ask after reading the novel. What punishment was meted out to the White road engineer for flogging workers contrary to regulations and why did Obika and his father do nothing about Obika's flogging in spite of their threats? Why did the disturbances that arose over Oduche's imprisonment of a sacred python in a box fizzle out as they did? And why did Obika have to die? One also wants to complain about the incidental and rather cursory nature of the treatment of the Europeans on the scene.

But when these questions have been asked and the complaints made, there remains the overwhelming achievement of the vivid and convincing re-creation of a world that is nearly past, there remain the naturalness of the events and people in this world and the astonishingly pungent concreteness of style that has evoked this society. May we hope that Achebe will explore this society to its fullest depths before he turns, if ever he turns, to other topics.

The Present in the Past

Donatus Nwoga

Arrow of God by Chinua Achebe (Heinemann, R2.10)

THE FEELING OF remarkable development was inescapable. Here was a fuller, deeper tone to the voice of an old friend. Here was a new sense of freedom, of exhilaration, of uninhibitedness, of self-confidence.

Achebe no longer has any doubts about his style. The Ibo words are clearly best in certain situations and they are used with no apologies. The interested will know where to find the translations if any. And sometimes, in any case, it is not necessary to find the translations. When the proverb says that one should know the size of his anus before he swallows an *udala* seed the meaning is obvious without knowing the translation of *udala*. And when somebody says “It ran away *fiam* . . .” the onomatopoeic sense of *fiam* is independent of prose meaning. So that Achebe has here, without losing meaning for the outsider, confidently indulged in private linguistic communion with his local audience.

And the proverbs figure conspicuously. I once worried about Achebe's proverbs. I said to myself, these proverbs are too many and are taking the place of speech. Here are more proverbs and they are speech. They are so integrated into the style that they have become less conspicuous. Their effect has become so diffused over the setting and the events that one instinctively thinks of the definition of style as atmosphere.

The atmosphere, that “emotional aura which the work bears and which establishes the reader's expectations and attitude”, is one pervaded by the supernatural. The principal person of the novel is Ezeulu, the

arrow of God, the High Priest of Ulu, the God that rules over the six villages of Umuaro. When the six villages were separate, each with its individual god, the Abam warriors had stricken them one by one and taken them by storm. They had therefore come together and erected the Ulu deity to hold them together and protect them, and the ancestors of the present Ezeulu had carried the deity through a host of enemies into Umuaro village square. It was Ezeulu's right and responsibility to declare the time for planting crops. He announced the time for the ceremonies and celebrations, especially the purification Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves. He, through Ulu, had the power to call the New Yam Festival or delay it and have the yam harvest destroyed. Ezeulu was half-man and half-spirit. He knew the will of Ulu and declared it fearlessly against all odds. If he thought a war was unjust he refused to call his deity into it. If his people fought against another village, he declared the true culprit even if it was his own village.

This it was that brought conflict between him and certain members of his community who thought that he had betrayed them. This it was also that brought him into contact with the British Administration, whose officers, in their dithering with their friend the “truth speaking witch-doctor”, unleashed more destructive forces in the community than they could ever begin to understand.

BUT THIS IS NOT a book with an after taste of bitterness. There is not, for example, the biting irony of the concluding words of *Things Fall Apart*, though here we find that the book the Administrative Officer was going to write—*The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* (what a smug title)—is now a manual for colonial officers who have answered “the call”. Achebe has gone back in time and filled some of the gap between *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*. The time setting is around 1921, the time of the appointment of Warrant Chiefs, and the locality is a village some miles from Umuofia as yet only slightly touched by the forces that had already