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~~Tunde Lakofu, Extract from an Interview with Kole Omotoso, Minor (Zaria),~~

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Dili Ezughah, "Omotoso Banished into Creative Bliss," The Guardian (Lagos)  
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<sub>A</sub>

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Peter Nazareth, "The Tortoise is an Animal, But He is Also a Wise Creature,"

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<sub>A</sub> <sub>A</sub>

71 - 86.

*John Agetua*  
January 9, 1987

KOLE OMOTOSO

(21 April 1943)

F. Odun Balogun

University of Benin, Nigeria

BOOKS

The Edifice (London: Heinemann, 1971);

The Combat (London: Heinemann, 1972);

Miracles and Other Stories (Ibadan: Onibonoje, 1973; revised in 1978);

Fella's Choice (Benin: <sup>City</sup> Ethiope Publishing Corporation, 1974);

Sacrifice (Ibadan: Onibonoje, 1974; revised in 1978);

The Curse (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1976);

The Scales (Ibadan: Onibonoje, 1976);

Shadows in the Horizon, ~~published privately by the author at~~ (Ile-Ife: Kule Omotoso, Nigeria, ~~in May~~ 1977).

To Borrow A Wandering Leaf (Akure: Olaiya Fagbamigbe Limited, 1978);

The Form of the African Novel (Akure: Olaiya Fagbamigbe Limited, 1979;

corrected and reprinted by McQuick Publishers, Lagos, 1986);

Memories of our Recent Boom (Essex: Longmans, 1982);

The Theatrical Into Theatre: A study of the drama and theatre of the English-speaking Caribbean (London: New Beacon Books, 1982);

All This Must Be Seen (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1986);

(Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1988).

Just Before Dawn - tentative title of a new novel to be released early

~~in 1987 by Spectrum Publishing Company, Ibadan, Nigeria.~~

A Writer's Diary - selection from the series of articles Omotoso published in West Africa. It is expected in the market in 1987 under the imprint of Saros International Publishers, London.

#### PLAY PRODUCTIONS

As a lecturer in the department of Dramatic Art, University of Ife, Omotoso has directed and acted in numerous plays including his award-winning unpublished play, Pitched Against the Gods, Ikare, Deen Playhouse, Ansaruddeen Grammar School, Ikare, March-April 1969 and The Last Competition, Lagos, Open Theatre of the National Theatre, Iganmu, 25-27 November 1983. Recently he adapted and directed Lanke Omuti - a multi-lingual adaptation after Amos Tutuola's The Palmwine Drinkard and Kola Ogunmola's Yoruba opera Lanke Omu. The University of Ife theatre toured major theatres in Nigeria with this adaptation in 1985. He has also written a series of television plays for the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Akure (1982-1983) and previously for the former Western Nigeria Television (WNTV), Ibadan.

#### OTHER

The Indigenous for National Development co-edited with G.O. Onibonoje and

O.A. Lawal (Ibadan: Onibonoje, 1976). He also contributed a chapter titled

"The Indigenous Publisher and the Future of Culture in Nigeria." Omotoso has also edited or co-edited short-lived series and journals. One of them was the Newsprint Fiction Series, which he published privately and in which his short stories, "A Feast in the Time of Plague," "This Girl Sunshine" and "With Comic Commencement" appeared in February 1983. In the seventies and early eighties he coedited with university colleagues the journals New Horn (University of Ibadan) and Positive Review (University of Ife).

#### PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS

(a) Fiction: "The Child Next-door," Sunday Times (Lagos), Nigeria,

14 April 1974; "The End of Johnbool," Top Life (May 1979): 29-29, 50-51;

(Lagos),

"The Woman And the Goat," Sunday Concord ~~(Lagos)~~ 9 March 1980;

"With Comic Commencement," Okike, 17 (1980): 46-49

(b) Non-Fiction: Between 1973 and 1980 Omotoso published numerous brief articles in Afriscopes, a Nigerian popular monthly magazine of which he was the literary editor. These articles along with others scattered in African Literature Today, West Africa and several Nigerian dailies contain abundant information for the study of Omotoso's literary ideology.

~~Kole Omotoso, the forty-four-year-old prolific writer whose first~~

## Kole Omotoso

~~major work appeared sixteen years ago,~~ belongs to, and indeed personifies, the

second generation of Nigerian writers. He began from the ~~onset~~<sup>outset</sup> to address ~~the~~<sup>a</sup>

home audience, often using local publishers and ~~generally~~<sup>g</sup> employing an artistic

style that is accessible to the common man. He is a fearless social critic,

~~persistently using his~~<sup>whose</sup> creative writing and frequent appearances in the news

media ~~to~~<sup>g</sup> present the tragic situation of the common man ~~in criticism~~<sup>and criticize</sup> of the

Nigerian intellectual, political and business elites who are given to materia-

lism and the perpetuation of neocolonialism. In spite of an asthmatic condition,

Omotoso is an ~~unbelievably~~<sup>g</sup> energetic individual, tirelessly attending to numerous

commitments, one of which involves promoting the interest~~s~~ of the Association of

Nigerian Authors (ANA). He was National Secretary for ~~the~~<sup>this</sup> association from its

inception in 1981 till 1984, ~~and his recent election as~~<sup>served as its</sup> National President ~~(1986-87)~~<sup>in</sup>

~~but 1986)~~<sup>1986-87,</sup> is a clear indication that the second generation of Nigerian writers

have come to full maturity.

~~Omotoso is a tall, trim, sociable person. He is well travelled, married~~

~~to a wife from Barbados and has three children - a girl and two boys. He schooled~~

at Oyemekun Grammar School, Akure (his home town) and at King's College, Lagos.

His degrees were obtained from the University of Ibadan (B.A., French and Arabic,

1968) and the University of Edinburgh (Ph.D., Modern Arabic Literature, 1972).

He lectured briefly (1972-76) at Ibadan before moving to the University of Ife.

Omotoso started writing ~~quite early in life~~ while ~~just~~<sup>in</sup> a primary school, ~~pupil~~. The inspiration to write came both from listening in the evenings to the telling of folktales during traditional family folktale sessions and from observing his late uncle, Olaiya Fagbamigbe, who used to write and publish in Yoruba. Omotoso began by transcribing the tales he had heard for the pleasure of fellow pupils, ~~and~~ <sup>writing was done</sup> this ~~was~~<sup>and</sup> in Yoruba, his native tongue; but by the sixties, when <sup>he was</sup> ~~as~~ a secondary school pupil his stories started appearing in Radio Times, Flamingo and others, <sup>media,</sup> he like most Nigerian writers of his generation had abandoned the mother tongue for English. Omotoso, whose father died while he was in primary school, has always been an adventurous individual. This is evident in his selection of Arabic as <sup>a</sup> major at ~~entering~~ the university even though he absolutely had no previous knowledge of the language. It is also manifest in his attempts at various times to do creative writing in French and Arabic. Omotoso's initial plan had been to enter the foreign service but ~~due to~~ <sup>g</sup> circumstances ~~that~~ <sup>g</sup> compelled him to abandon this ambition.

His first novel, The Edifice, was started in 1969, barely three months

after Omotoso enrolled for graduate studies at Edinburgh. Writing the novel, Omotoso ~~disclosed to Peter Nazareth~~, <sup>has said,</sup> was a therapeutic exercise

in coping with the hostile aspects of his new environment. It enabled

him <sup>to</sup> reject the idea of giving up his studies to return to Nigeria. The

novel <sup>shows</sup> ~~presents the immorality characterizing the protagonist's (Dela)~~ <sup>of a young man's strained</sup>

~~personal~~ relationship with his white wife, Daisy, especially on his return

from Britain to Nigeria. <sup>His</sup> ~~Dela's~~ hypocritical radicalism is also exposed.

<sup>Omotoso makes good use of</sup> ~~Unlike Peter Nazareth, Cheryl Dash fails to perceive the irony in the~~ <sup>his</sup>

<sup>this protagonist.</sup> ~~characterization of Dela and erroneously declares the novel a failure.~~

Omotoso's second novel, The Combat, written in Nigeria, <sup>recorded</sup> ~~was~~ his

reaction to the Nigerian civil war of 1967-70. The issues raised in the

novel had been <sup>touched upon</sup> ~~partially expressed~~ in two earlier short stories: "The

Nightmares of an Arch Rebel" ~~Sunday Times, Lagos, 1968~~ and "Isaac" (later

included in the collection, Miracles and Other Stories), ~~1973~~.

Omotoso departs from the realistic method of The Edifice and employs the mode

of allegory to expose the absurdity of the Nigerian civil war. This he does

by depicting two bosom friends, Chuku and Ojo, who symbolize the two sides in the

~~Nigerian~~ war. The two men ~~father~~ compound the stupidity of a frivolous  
personal quarrel by escalating it to an international ~~combat~~ <sup>military conflict</sup>. While  
ridiculing the major participants in the combat, the author shows deep  
concern for the common man, represented by an orphan ~~called~~ <sup>named</sup> Isaac, who  
becomes the victim of the absurd political game. Even though ~~Cheryl Dash~~

~~complains of a loss of control over symbol and allegory and Omotoso faults~~  
himself with "a complete failure of tone" ~~(interview with Lindfors)~~, there  
is no doubt that the novel works as an allegory. The gripping, suspenseful  
story is brief and universally valid. Furthermore, it maintains a careful  
balance between comedy and tragedy, and its racy prose ~~hilariously~~ <sup>amuses</sup>  
~~at the same time as it~~ <sup>while</sup> subtly underscores <sup>ing</sup> the tragedy of its subject matter.

Omotoso's next publication is a collection entitled Miracles and Other  
Stories. Although all ~~the~~ <sup>written in a language</sup> six stories in it focus on children ~~characters~~  
and are ~~linguistically~~ accessible to children, they are not children's  
stories. Omotoso uses them to prick the conscience of his Nigerian adult  
readers who are responsible for the neglect and tragic circumstances of the  
children of the poor, ~~in our society~~. The stories also address vital national

issues of primary concern to adults. The title story, for instance,

suggests ~~the synthesis of the~~ <sup>synthesizing</sup> usable elements <sup>from</sup> both ~~the~~ past and modern contact with the West <sup>to achieve</sup> ~~on the premise of self-reliance~~ <sup>thereby solving</sup> ~~as a solution to~~ the

problem of underdevelopment. All the stories, except "The Happy Boy," which

is an allegorically composed modern folktale, are realistic. ~~They~~ <sup>All</sup> are brief,

vividly dramatic and totally absorbing. ~~Because of their success, Dash~~

~~erroneously concludes that "Omotoso's strength lies in the short development~~

~~of a single idea rather than in the sustained control needed in a novel" (p.49).~~

Fella's Choice is Omotoso's attempt at starting an African tradition

in the genre of the detective novel. It was fashioned after the James

Bond ~~series~~ <sup>series</sup>, and Omotoso's objective was to win ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> Nigerian youth, who

avidly read this genre of the novel away from ~~the~~ <sup>Western</sup> ~~variant~~ <sup>detective fiction</sup> and the

ideology it propagates. In Fella's Choice, Omotoso tempers the heroic

individualism characteristic of the ~~Western~~ <sup>Western</sup> detective novel with an emphasis

on communal ethics. Even though Fella remains the prime mover, the success

of his actions at critical moments always depends on the cooperative effort

of his gang as a united body. Also, the novel's thematic preoccupation, ~~is of~~

~~patriotic importance, as it concerns neutralizing~~ <sup>which</sup> the anti-African designs

of the secret agents of apartheid South Africa, *has political importance.*

*The relationship between*  
~~Omotoso's concern with~~ Africa's past and its future - a recurrent  
*Omotoso's* *major focus*  
theme in ~~his~~ works - becomes the ~~major preoccupation~~ in his next novel,

Sacrifice. In this narrative, set in Akure, Omotoso's home town, Dr. Siwaju

is faced with the moral predicament of practising as a medical doctor in

the same town as his mother, who has refused to abandon the profession of

prostitution from which she had earned the money to give him <sup>an</sup> education. The

allegoric<sup>al</sup> nature of the narrative is ~~obviously~~ <sup>made</sup> obvious in the dialogues

and correspondence between Dr. Siwaju and Flor, his wife. Africa, the

novel suggests, has first to understand and come to terms with its past,

however sordid, before it can move forward. The story, ~~is~~ rendered in

naturalistic detail, <sup>and making use of</sup> ~~and it~~ appropriately uses the first person narrative <sup>ion,</sup>

~~being a novel that~~ is concerned with Dr. Siwaju's search for self-identity.

Omotoso's next work, a one-act play entitled The Curse, is in the

parabolic style. A misused servant overthrows his rich, vulgar and saddistic

master but immediately begins to behave in ~~a manner~~ <sup>ha</sup> worse than the old master,

The play is pessimistic and ambiguous. If it refers to history and power

aggrandisement on the part of successive ruling social classes, it has unfortunately ignored the qualitative differences between these classes. But its concern <sup>real</sup> ~~is~~ <sup>seems to</sup> be with the situation in which some of those who fought together with others in a revolution sometimes turn round to hijack power and pervert the revolution to serve personal goals. There is limited stylization in characterization and <sup>some</sup> exaggeration in the use of details.

The Scale is Omotoso's next attempt at the genre of the detective novel. As in the first attempt, Omotoso jettisons individualism and underscores communalism as the basis of heroism. The novel is also Omotoso's most socialist work so far. The hero, Barri, who at various stages in his ideological development recalls Ofeyi and Demakin of Soyinka's Season of Anomy, organises <sup>z</sup> a commune of fighters in the fashion of Armah's Two Thousand Seasons and defeats Chief Daniran, an obvious symbolic representation of the callous, rich exploiters of the poor in the society. While echoing the two mentioned novels, The Scale <sup>never achieves</sup> ~~goes nowhere near~~ their artistic grandeur, belonging, as <sup>intended</sup> ~~it was conceived~~ by the author, to the lower level of popular fiction. It must be stressed, however, that at that level, it is sufficiently entertaining.

The late seventies seem to mark the most intense period of Omotoso's interest in revolutionary, socialist ideas, for The Scales <sup>1970</sup> was immediately followed by Shadows in the Horizon <sup>1971</sup>, the most revolutionary of his works. The latter is a four-act play which Omotoso had to publish on his own as no publisher would touch it. Ironically, it has turned out to be the first of his major works to be translated into Russian. The play is an optimistic socialist revision of the pessimistic treatment of the theme of revolution presented in The Curse <sup>1970</sup>. ~~The play, which is~~

Dedicated to the "the day when those who have not shall not be satisfied with their nothing," <sup>it</sup> <sub>A</sub> centers attention on how the workers of a particular country quickly regroup, recapture a revolution which had earlier been hijacked from them, and establish a worker's dictatorship. The overthrown exploitative class is represented by a businessman, an ex-soldier and a university professor. The play is more stylized than The Curse, and <sup>an</sup> ~~the~~ audience might not immediately recognize the symbolic implications of the beginning action.

Omotoso's next work, a novel entitled To Borrow a Wandering Leaf, presents a group of administrative and intellectual elites undertaking a trip

to the interior of Nigeria. The trip <sup>reveals why</sup> ~~becomes an eye-opener with respect~~

~~to the reasons~~ Nigeria has continued to "wander" rather than develop.

~~But~~ Misdirected economic planning stresses dependence on foreign aid rather than self-reliance; and the relationship between the city and the village, as well between the elites and the people, is exploitative rather than collaborative.

Even the best among the elites, such as the character Kobina, find their efforts to set things right frustrated by the system. A radical socialist

alternative is <sup>suggested</sup> ~~intimated~~ as <sup>a</sup> solution through a Ghanaian character

<sup>significantly called Kwame,</sup> Though the narrative beauty of individual

passages is captivating, the novel as a whole leaves the reader dissatisfied.

The complex multiple plot ~~is diffuse with no focal action and has a plot that~~ <sup>there is</sup> produces diffuse action and a confused chronology, ~~been carefully sorted out to eliminate confusion with regard to theme and the~~

~~chronology/ confu~~

The Form of the African Novel is <sup>a long</sup> ~~a continuous~~ essay in which Omotoso examines a selection of novels with the purpose of identifying the direction in which ~~the~~ <sup>g</sup> novelistic style is developing in Africa. He sees a shift from the critical realism of the fifties and sixties to the "marvelous

realism" of the seventies. The latter involves the use of varying levels of folkloric fantasy in an essentially realistic narrative. He argues against identifying the trend as modernist. He also observes that there is a growing radicalization in the treatment of theme among leading African novelists. Although the topic of the essay is highly relevant, its treatment is too thin and hasty to be impressive.

In Memories of our Recent Boom, Omotoso returns once more to the theme of the wrongful application of educational training earlier treated in The Edifice and in To Borrow a Wandering Leaf. Thanks to the industry of his mother, his own intellectual endowments and the <sup>good</sup> fortune of an overseas scholarship, Seven Alaka escapes the most abject village poverty imaginable to become a stupendously rich contractor in the Nigeria of the oil boom era. Rather than use his enormous wealth and influence to bridge the village-city, poor-rich gap, the self-advertising Seven Alaka pursues all <sup>types</sup> ~~manners~~ of bourgeois comfort and self-glorification. He ends up dying in a car accident on the day that should have been his day of glory. This character who bears a name with mythical significance - Seven - is the ultimate

realisation<sup>2</sup> of earlier characters like Dele of The Edifice, Professor Akowe and Kehinde George of To Borrow a Wandering Leaf. This anti-materialist narrative is lucid and even beautifully poetic, especially in the ~~first~~ <sup>early</sup> ~~part~~ chapters.

Omotoso's second <sup>critical</sup> book, ~~of essays~~, The Theatrical into Theatre, is a more than the first, <sup>being</sup> impressive piece of scholarship/. ~~It is~~ a fairly comprehensive survey of the development of Caribbean drama and drama criticism. It examines how the theatrical elements of earlier periods are being utilised<sup>2</sup> with varying degrees of success to create modern drama. It discusses performance, <sup>language, and</sup> themes ~~and language~~ of this drama. Omotoso sees the future of Caribbean drama in the fostering of a "community of sensibilities" rather than a "community of faiths" since the former unites while the latter fragments. Furthermore, the drama must go back to <sup>its</sup> roots to exploit without colour <sup>and</sup> prejudice the theatrical resources, oral and written, of all the people of any given Caribbean state. Not surprisingly, Omotoso see the greatest achievement of Caribbean drama <sup>in the works of</sup> ~~as~~ Derek Walcott, a social critic who "has repeatedly expressed the view that the political necessity of the West Indies is socialism, very close to marxism. Such a system he feels would serve to alleviate the

poverty of the masses" (~~pp. 110, 161~~)

All This Must Be Seen is an account of Omotoso's extensive literary journey through the Soviet Union between August and September, 1983. The greater part of the book ~~gives~~ gives details of visits to administrative, educational, cultural and economic establishments, duplicat<sup>ing</sup> general information contained in tourist guide books, and <sup>therefore</sup> tends to bore. ~~Luckily,~~ <sup>Fortunately,</sup> these materials are interspersed with the more interesting introspective chapters in which the author records his intellectual and emotional responses to ~~the~~ Soviet peoples, Soviet history, politics, technology, and cultural policy and practices. His responses are highly positive, ~~in fact,~~ <sup>even</sup> enthusiastic. The book is ~~perhaps even more~~ useful as a record of the history of Omotoso's ideological interest in the Soviet Union since 1961. It also provides a wealth of information on matters such as Omotoso's unpublished early works, his reason for abandoning the detective series, the sources of <sup>his</sup> inspiration for writing certain works, and the nature of Russian literary influence on him. The book is in a sense a restatement of Omotoso's political and literary manifesto, and thus a summation of views expressed in various media <sup>over the</sup> ~~in the past~~ years.

# Just Before Dawn is

~~Our Hands Are Tied~~ is the tentative title for the most ambitious

work Omotoso has yet attempted, and it is expected in the market ~~early in~~

In an article published in (Lagos) on 1987. An article on page 10 of The Guardian (Nig) of Monday 9 June 1986,

is quoted as saying that the book was inspired by "a recognition of the need for Nigerian literature to depict the multiplicity of the nation."

Describing the subject and form of the work, Omotoso says: "Genre-wise, it

is neither here nor there. It is not just fiction. Neither is it plain facts.

It is more of a mixture of both. What the Americans would call 'Faction.'

Stylistically it is close to what you could call The New Journalism. But

it is basically a historical affair. It covers Nigeria from its inception

to December 31, 1983. And the length? About five hundred pages (175,000 words).

Plus an intimidating bibliography." Because of its historical, political and

literary nature, the work ~~is bound to attract more~~ <sup>has attracted a greater</sup> response from the Nigerian public than ~~had~~ <sup>have</sup> any of his previous publications.

~~From the way the balance tilts when weighing his publications as a whole,~~

~~it is quite obvious that for now~~ <sup>one can say that</sup> Omotoso is primarily a novelist even though

he has written a number of plays and his teaching career is in the field

of drama. The direction in his writing has clearly been ~~that of~~ <sup>toward</sup> a gradual

radicalization of the content of fiction <sup>his</sup> ~~consistent with the~~ <sup>as well as toward</sup> expression  
of a systematically firmer belief in socialism in the non-fictional works.

Although the quality of his writings has not been altogether even,

although there is evidence of haste in the proof<sup>g</sup> reading of many works,

and although the dexterity one expects from Omotoso<sup>him</sup> at this stage in the

the handling of the technicalities of fiction is still a little ~~short of~~ <sup>deficient,</sup>

~~expectation,~~ there is absolutely no doubt that Omotoso, who is already an

important writer, has steadily been acquiring what it takes to become a

great African writer. His <sup>handling</sup> ~~mastery~~ of language, which has consistently been

the source of aesthetic satisfaction in ~~the reading of~~ his works, has

<sup>g</sup> ~~systematically~~ improved; his tone is no longer shaky and juvenile but firm

and philosophical; and there is a noticeable tendency beginning with Memories

of our Recent Boom to abandon the slim text of the early period for the more

ambitious, voluminous novel. All Omotoso needs to overcome his shortcomings

is a little more care, a <sup>greater</sup> ~~little patient~~ attention to details.

#### INTERVIEWS

Bernth Lindfors, "Kole Omotoso Interviewed" Cultural Events in Africa, 103

(1973): 2 - 12'

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<dlb 125> Omotoso  
to: mss. by, pdm  
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# Kole Omotoso

(21 April 1943 -)

F. Odun Balogun  
Southern University

- BOOKS *Notes, Q & A on Peter Edwards' West African Narrative* (Ibadan: Onibonoje, 1968);  
*The Edifice* (London: Heinemann, 1971);  
*The Combat* (London: Heinemann, 1972);  
*Miracles and Other Stories* (Ibadan: Onibonoje, 1973; revised, 1978);  
*Fella's Choice* (Benin City, Nigeria: Ethiope, 1974);  
*Sacrifice* (Ibadan: Onibonoje, 1974; revised, 1978);  
*The Curse* (Ibadan: New Horn, 1976);  
*The Scales* (Ibadan: Onibonoje, 1976);  
*Shadows in the Horizon* (Ibadan: Omotoso/Sketch, 1977);  
*To Borrow a Wandering Leaf* (Akure, Nigeria: Olaiya Fagbamigbe, 1978);  
*The Form of the African Novel* (Akure, Nigeria: Olaiya Fagbamigbe, 1979; revised edition, Lagos: McQuick, 1986);  
*Memories of Our Recent Boom* (Harlow, U.K.: Longman, 1982);  
*The Theatrical into Theatre: A Study of the Drama and Theatre of the English-Speaking Caribbean* (London: New Beacon, 1982);  
*A Feast in the Time of Plague* (Ife-Ife, Nigeria: Dramatic Arts/ Unife, 1983);  
*This Girl Sunshine* (Ife-Ife, Nigeria: Dramatic Arts/ Unife, 1983);  
*All This Must Be Seen* (Moscow: Progress, 1986);  
*Just Before Dawn* (Ibadan: Spectrum, 1988).

PLAY PRODUCTIONS: *Pitched Against the Gods*, Ikare, Nigeria, Deen Playhouse, March 1969;  
*The Last Competition*, Lagos, Open Theatre, 25 November 1983.

RECORDING: *Kole Omotoso of Nigeria*, Washington, D.C., Voice of America, 1978.

OTHER: "The Indigenous Publisher and the Future of Culture in Nigeria", in *The Indigenous for National Development*, edited by Omotoso, G. O. Onibonoje, and O. A. Lawal (Ibadan: Onibonoje, 1976).

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- SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS (1-1)
- UNCOLLECTED: "The Child Next-door," *Sunday Times* (Lagos), 14 April 1974;
- "The End of Johnbool," *Top Life* (May 1979): 29-29, 50-51;
- "The Woman And the Goat," *Sunday Concord* (Lagos), 9 March 1980;
- "With Comic Commencement," *Okike*, 17 (1980): 46-49;
- "Secret Histories," by Omotoso and Adewale Maja-Pearce, *Index on Censorship*, 18, no. 2 (1989): 14-15.

Kole Omotoso belongs to, and indeed personifies, the second generation of Nigerian writers. From the outset he began to address a local audience, often using local publishers and employing an artistic style that is accessible to common people. He is a fearless social critic whose creative writing and frequent presentations in the news media reveal the tragic situation of the common man and criticize the Nigerian intellectual, political, and business elite who are given to materialism and the perpetuation of neocolonialism. In spite of an asthmatic condition, Omotoso is energetic, tirelessly attending to many commitments, one of which involves promoting the interests of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA). He was national secretary for this association from its inception in 1981 until 1984 and served as its national president from 1986 to 1987.

Omotoso was born on 21 April 1943 in Akure and obtained his early education in local schools and at King's College, Lagos. His academic degrees were earned at the University of Ibadan (B.A. in French and Arabic, 1968) and the University of Edinburgh (Ph.D. in modern Arabic literature, 1972). He lectured briefly (1972-1976) at Ibadan before being hired by the University of Ife. He is married to a Barbadian, and they have a daughter and two sons.

Omotoso starts writing while in primary school. The inspiration to write came both from listening in the evenings to the telling of tales during traditional family folktale sessions and from observing his uncle Olaiya Fagbamigbe, who wrote and published in Yoruba. Omotoso began by transcribing for the pleasure of fellow pupils the tales he had heard. This writing was done in Yoruba, his native tongue, but by the 1960s, when he was a secondary-school pupil his stories started appearing in *Radio Times*, *Flamingo*, and other media, he, like most Nigerian writers of his generation, had abandoned

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Ben, do you know his wife's name?

the mother tongue for English. Omotoso, whose father died while he was in primary school, has always been adventurous, which is evident in his selection ~~in his selection~~ of Arabic as a major in college, even though he had no previous knowledge of the language. His adventurousness is also manifest in his attempts at various times to do creative writing in French and Arabic. Omotoso's initial plan had been to enter the foreign service, but circumstances compelled him to abandon this ambition.

His first novel, *The Edifice* (1971), was started in 1969, barely three months after Omotoso enrolled for graduate studies at Edinburgh. Writing the novel, Omotoso disclosed to Peter Nazareth, was a therapeutic exercise in coping with the hostile aspects of his new environment. The project and its success enabled him to reject the idea of giving up his studies to return to Nigeria. The novel shows a young man's strained relationship with his white wife, Daisy, especially on his return from Britain to Nigeria. His hypocritical radicalism is also exposed. Omotoso makes good use of irony in his characterization of this protagonist.

Omotoso's second novel, *The Combat* (1972), written in Nigeria, records his reaction to the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970). The issues raised in the novel had been touched upon in two earlier short stories: "The Nightmares of an Arch Rebel" and "Isaac" (later included in the collection *Miracles and Other Stories*, 1973). In *The Combat* Omotoso departs from the realistic method of *The Edifice* and employs allegory to expose the absurdity of the Nigerian civil war. He depicts two close friends, Chuku and Ojo, who symbolize the two sides in the war. The two men compound the stupidity of a frivolous personal quarrel by escalating it into an international military conflict. While ridiculing the major participants in the combat, Omotoso shows deep concern for the common man, represented by an orphan named Isaac, who becomes the victim of the absurd political game. Even though, in his 1973 interview with Bernth Lindfors, Omotoso faults himself with "a complete failure of tone" in the novel, there is no doubt that the plot works as an allegory. The gripping, suspenseful story is brief and universally valid. Furthermore, he maintains a careful balance between comedy and tragedy, and the racy prose amuses while subtly underscoring the tragedy of the subject matter.

Omotoso's next publication, *Miracles and Other Stories*, comprises six stories that focus on children and are written in a language accessible to children, but they are not really meant for children. Omotoso

uses these stories to prick the consciences of his Nigerian adult readers who are responsible for the neglect and tragic circumstances of poor children. The stories also address vital national issues of primary concern to adults. The title story, for instance, suggests synthesizing usable elements from both past and modern contact with the West to achieve self-reliance, thereby solving the problem of underdevelopment. All the stories except "The Happy Boy," which is an allegorically composed modern folktale, are realistic. All are brief, dramatic, and absorbing.

*Fella's Choice* (1974) is Omotoso's attempt at starting an African tradition in the genre of the detective novel. The book is fashioned after the James Bond series, and Omotoso's objective was to win Nigerian youths away from Western detective fiction and the ideology it propagates. In *Fella's Choice* Omotoso tempers the heroic individualism characteristic of the Western detective novel with an emphasis on communal ethics. Even though Fella remains the prime mover, the success of his actions at critical moments always depends on the cooperative effort of his gang as a united body. The novel's theme, which concerns neutralizing the anti-African designs of the secret agents of apartheid South Africa, has political importance.

The relationship between Africa's past and its future is a recurrent theme in Omotoso's works. It is the major focus in his next novel, *Sacrifice* (1974). In this narrative, set in Akure, Omotoso's hometown, Dr. Siwaju is faced with the moral predicament of being a medical doctor in the same town as his mother, who has refused to abandon the profession of prostitution from which she had earned the money to give him an education. The allegorical nature of the narrative is made obvious in the dialogue and correspondence between Dr. Siwaju and Flor, his wife. Africa, the novel suggests, has first to understand and come to terms with its past, however sordid, before it can move forward. The story, rendered in naturalistic detail and making use of first person narration, is concerned with Dr. Siwaju's search for identity.

Omotoso's next published book, the one-act play *The Curse* (1976), is in the parabolic style. A misused servant overthrows his rich, vulgar, and sadistic master but immediately begins to behave worse than the old master had. The play is pessimistic and ambiguous. If it refers to history and power aggrandizement on the part of successive ruling social classes, Omotoso has unfortunately ignored the qualitative differences between these classes. But his real concern seems to be with the situation

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in which some of those who fought together with others in a revolution sometimes turn to usurping power and perverting the revolution to serve personal goals. There is limited stylization in characterization and some exaggeration in the use of details.

*The Scale* (1976) is another attempt at the genre of the detective novel. As in his first one, Omotoso jettisons individualism and underscores communalism as the basis of heroism. The novel is also Omotoso's most socialist work up to that time. The hero, Barri, who at various stages in his ideological development recalls Ofeyi and Demakin of Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* (1973), organizes a commune of fighters in the fashion of ~~Ayi Kwei~~ protagonist in Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) and defeats Chief Daniran, an obvious symbolic representation of the callous, rich exploiters of the poor in the society. While echoing the Soyinka and Armah novels, *The Scale* never achieves their artistic grandeur, belonging, as intended, to the level of popular fiction. At that level, however, it is sufficiently entertaining.

The late 1970s seemed to mark the most intense period of Omotoso's interest in revolutionary, socialist ideas, for *The Scales* was immediately followed by *Shadows in the Horizon* (1977), clearly the most revolutionary of his works. It is a four-act play, which Omotoso had to publish on his own as no publisher would touch it. Ironically it was the first of his major works to be translated into a foreign language (Russian). The play is an optimistic, socialist revision of the pessimistic treatment of the theme of revolution presented in *The Curse*. Dedicated to "the day when those who have not shall not be satisfied with their nothing," *Shadows* centers on how the workers of a particular country quickly regroup, recapture a revolution that had earlier been taken away from them, and establish a workers' dictatorship. The overthrown exploitative class is represented by a businessman, a former soldier, and a university professor. The play is more stylized than *The Curse*, and an audience might not immediately recognize the symbolic implications of the beginning action.

Omotoso's next work, the novel *To Borrow a Wandering Leaf* (1978), presents a group of administrative and intellectual elites undertaking a trip to the interior of Nigeria. The trip reveals why Nigeria has continued to "wander" rather than develop. Misdirected economic planning stresses dependence on foreign aid rather than self-reliance; and the relationship between the city and the village, as well as between the elite and the common people, is exploitative rather than collaborative. Even the best

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among the elite, such as the character Kobina, find their efforts to set things right frustrated by the system. Through a Ghanaian character significantly named Kwame, a radical socialist alternative is suggested as a solution. Though the narrative beauty of individual passages is captivating, the novel as a whole can leave the reader dissatisfied. The complex multiple plot produces diffuse action and a confused chronology.

*The Form of the African Novel* (1979) is a long essay in which Omotoso examines a selection of novels with the purpose of identifying the direction in which novelistic style is developing in Africa. He sees a shift from the critical realism of the 1950s and 1960s to the "marvelous realism" of the 1970s. The latter involves the use of varying levels of folkloric fantasy in an essentially realistic narrative. He argues against identifying the trend as modernist. He also observes that, among leading African novelists, there is a growing radicalization in the treatment of themes. Although the topic of the essay is highly relevant, its treatment is too thin and hasty to be impressive.

In his novel *Memories of Our Recent Boom* (1982) Omotoso returns once more to the theme of the wrongful application of educational training, which he treated earlier in *The Edifice* and *To Borrow a Wandering Leaf*. Thanks to the industry of protagonist Seven Alaka's mother, his own intellectual endowments, and the good fortune of an overseas scholarship, Seven escapes abject village poverty to become a rich contractor in the Nigeria of the oil-boom era. Rather than use his enormous wealth and influence to bridge the village city, poor rich gaps, the self-advertising Seven pursues all types of bourgeois comfort and self-glorification. He ends up dying in a car accident on the day that should have been his day of glory. This character, who bears a name with mythical, numerical significance, is the ultimate realization of earlier characters, such as the protagonist Dele of *The Edifice*, and Professor Akowe and Kehinde George of *To Borrow a Wandering Leaf*. *Memories*, an antimaterialist narrative, is lucid and poetic, especially in the early chapters.

Omotoso's second critical book, *The Theatrical into Theatre* (1982), is a more impressive piece of scholarship than the first, being a fairly comprehensive survey of the development of Caribbean drama and drama criticism. Omotoso examines how the theatrical elements of earlier periods are being utilized with varying degrees of success to create drama. He discusses performances, language, and themes of this new drama. Omotoso sees the future of Caribbean drama in the fostering of a

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"community of sensibilities" rather than a "community of faiths," because the former unites while the latter fragments. Furthermore the drama must go back to its roots to exploit, without color prejudice, the theatrical resources, oral and written, of all the people of any Caribbean state. Not surprisingly Omotoso sees the greatest achievement of Caribbean drama in the works of Derek Walcott, a social critic who "has repeatedly expressed the view that the political necessity of the West Indies is socialism, very close to marxism. Such a system he feels would serve to alleviate the poverty of the masses."

*All This Must Be Seen* (1986), his next major publication, is an account of Omotoso's extensive journey through the Soviet Union between August and September 1983. The greater part of the book gives details of visits to administrative, educational, cultural, and economic establishments, and duplicates general information contained in tourist guidebooks; therefore, it tends to be boring. Fortunately, these materials are interspersed with more interesting introspective chapters in which Omotoso records his intellectual and emotional responses to Soviet people, history, politics, technology, and cultural policy and practices. His responses are highly positive, even enthusiastic. The book is useful as a record of the history of Omotoso's ideological interest in the Soviet Union since 1961. It also provides a wealth of information on matters such as his unpublished early works, his reason for abandoning the detective genre, the sources of his inspiration for writing certain works, and the nature of Russian literary influence on him. The book is in a sense a restatement of Omotoso's political and literary manifesto, and thus it is a summation of views he has expressed in various media over the years.

*Just Before Dawn* (1988) is the most ambitious and impressive novel Omotoso has written. It employs the innovative narrative method of a new genre, "faction," which conflates historical facts and fiction. The book provides the essential details of a century of Nigeria's history from the 1880s, in the colonial times, to the collapse of the Second Republic in 1983. The root of Nigeria's postcolonial instability, characterized mainly by ethnic rivalry, is traced to the divide-and-rule policy of the British colonial administration. The British maintained power during colonialism by pitting the less-developed, but favored, North against the more advanced South, but they also sought to assure continued control by establishing at independence a constitutional arrangement that would perpetuate ethnic divisiveness. The equally bitter personal rivalries among Nigerian civilian and military politicians

and the elite, who are all depicted as corrupt, selfish, and unmindful of the common people, further aggravated the already-tragic situation.

As fiction, *Just Before Dawn* rejects the strict, linear chronology of history and adopts a near-circular plot structure that traces the political intrigues of Nigerian historical characters. The story is captivating throughout, and its hold on the reader owes much to Omotoso's judicious disposition of his massive materials and the selection and arrangement of characters and incidents. Swiftly changing scenes produce cinematographic close-ups with vivid descriptions of public and private figures, historical and domestic events, private thoughts and political actions, and acts of courage and cowardice. Individual histories are dexterously woven into, and reflect, national history at every stage. *Just Before Dawn* is an interpretation of Nigeria's history by a nationalist, populist, southern Nigerian intellectual; as an interpretation, it is bound to be controversial in spite of the evident attempt at narrative objectivity.

Weighing his publications as a whole, one can say that Omotoso is primarily a novelist, even though he has written plays and has a teaching career in the field of drama. The direction in his writing has clearly been toward a gradual radicalization, as well as toward expression of a systematically firmer belief in socialism. Although the quality of his writing has not been altogether even, although there is evidence of haste in the proofreading of many works, and although the dexterity one expects from him in the handling of the technicalities of fiction is still a little deficient, there is absolutely no doubt that Omotoso, already an important writer, has steadily been acquiring what it takes to become a great African writer. His handling of language, which has consistently been the source of aesthetic satisfaction in his works, has improved; his tone is no longer shaky and juvenile but is firm and philosophical; and there is a noticeable tendency, beginning with *Memories of Our Recent Boom*, to abandon the slimness of the early books for more/ambitious, voluminous novels. All Omotoso needs to overcome his shortcomings is a little more care, a greater attention to details.

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This is inconsistent.  
I still don't understand  
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when not. Ben, please  
give him a call on  
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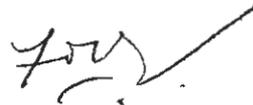
Prof. Bernth Lindfors  
Department of English  
The University of Texas at Austin  
Austin, Texas 78712-1164

Dear Professor Lindfors,

I wish to apologize for not meeting the December 24 deadline in spite of your reminders. Tried as I might, I could not find the time to read the book until after Christmas. I hope you still find it possible to insert the enclosed remarks on Just Before Dawn.

Happy New Year!

Sincerely,



F. Odun Balogun

Insertion into page 16 of the DLB entry on Kole Omotoso

Just Before Dawn is the most ambitious and impressive work Omotoso has yet written. It employs the innovative narrative method of the new genre, Faction, which conflates historical facts and fiction.

As history, the work provides the essential details of a century of Nigeria's history from the 1880's in the colonial times to the collapse of the Second Republic in 1983. The root of Nigeria's <sup>postcolonial</sup> ~~post-independence~~ instability, characterized mainly by ethnic rivalry, is traced to the divide-and-rule policy of the British colonial administration. The latter not only maintained power during colonialism by pitching the less-developed, but favored, North against the more advanced South, but also sought to assure itself of ~~post-independence~~ control by establishing at independence a constitutional arrangement that would perpetuate ethnic divisiveness. The equally bitter personal rivalries among ~~post-independence~~ Nigerian civilian and military politicians and elites, who are depicted as corrupt, selfish, and unmindful of the common man, further aggravate the already tragic situation.

As fiction, Just Before Dawn rejects the strict <sup>linear</sup> ~~linear~~ chronology of history and adopts a near-circular plot structure that traces the political intrigues of

Nigerian historical characters. The story is captivating throughout, and its hold on the reader owes much to the author's judicious disposition of his massive materials and the selection and arrangement of characters and incidents. Swiftly changing ~~scenes~~ scenes produce cinematographic close-ups with vivid ~~and~~ ~~often juxtaposed~~ descriptions of public and private figures, historical and domestic events, private thoughts and political actions, acts of courage and acts of cowardice, ~~deeds of generosity and deeds of dehumanization, inspiring hopes and tragic realities, etc.~~ Individual histories are dexterously woven into, and reflect, the national history at every stage.

Just Before Dawn is an interpretation of Nigeria's history by a nationalist, pro-common man, Southern Nigerian intellectual; and as an interpretation, it is bound to be controversial in spite of the author's evident attempt at narrative objectivity.

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Just Before Dawn is

~~Our Hands Are Tied is the tentative title for~~ the most ambitious

work Omotoso has yet attempted, ~~and it is expected in the market early in~~

In an <sup>published in</sup> <sup>(Lagos)</sup> <sup>on</sup> 1987. An article on ~~page 10 of~~ The Guardian (Nig) of Monday 9 June 1986,

<sup>is quoted</sup> ~~quotes~~ Omotoso, as saying that the book was inspired by "a recognition of the need for Nigerian literature to depict the multiplicity of the nation."

Describing the subject and form of the work, Omotoso says: "Genre-wise, it is neither here nor there. It is not just fiction. Neither is it plain facts.

It is more of a mixture of both. What the Americans would call 'Faction.'

Stylistically it is close to what you could call The New Journalism. But

it is basically a historical affair. It covers Nigeria from its inception

to December 31, 1983. And the length? About five hundred pages (175,000 words).

Plus an intimidating bibliography." Because of its historical, political and

literary nature, the work <sup>has attracted a greater</sup> ~~is bound to attract more~~ response from the Nigerian

public than <sup>have</sup> ~~had~~ any of his previous publications.

~~From the way the balance tilts when~~ weighing his publications as a whole,

<sup>one can say that</sup> ~~it is quite obvious that for now~~ Omotoso is primarily a novelist even though

he has written a number of plays and his teaching career is in the field

of drama. The direction in his writing has clearly been <sup>toward</sup> ~~the~~ a gradual