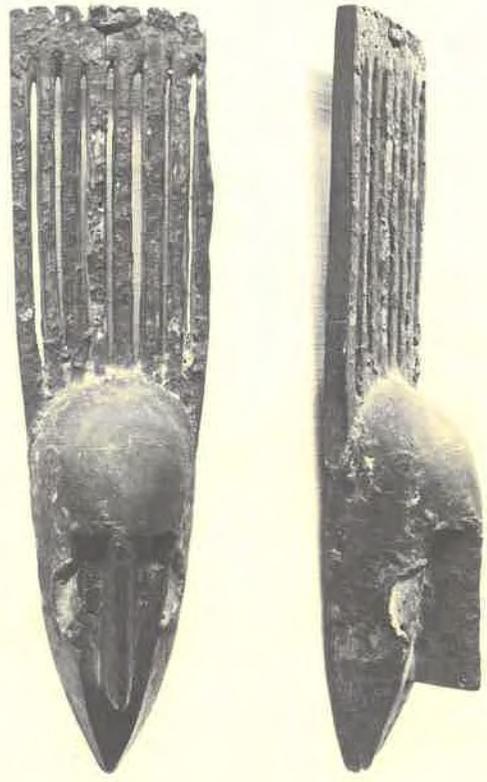


14 | 1

# Colby Library Quarterly



*Special Black Studies Issue*

VOLUME XV    NUMBER 4    DECEMBER 1979

him his novel, *Djouma, chien de la brousse*, that very day.<sup>82</sup> His letter of January 14, 1927, gave more details of the deal. He was asking Schomburg to pay him \$12,000 to \$15,000 in order to make him raise his bid to \$6,000 which was the amount he actually wanted for his manuscript. On March 4, 1927, he revealed his intention to sell the manuscript for \$1,500, which Schomburg had offered, if Schomburg did not want to pay \$2,500 or even \$2,000, which he, Maran, was demanding at that moment. "Mais alors qu'il se dépêche de m'envoyer ce qu'il m'a proposé lui-même," he added.

Schomburg, of course, made haste; but Maran soon discovered that what he thought that the collector of rare books and manuscripts had offered him was exactly 100 times more than he had been actually offered. He could not hide his bitterness as he gave Locke the details of the transaction in a letter dated 29 March 1927:

Après-demain, je défendrais une fois de plus ma race, bien que je n'ai nullement à me louer d'elle, et en particulier de la désinvolture et de l'impolitesse de certains de mes congénères américains.

Je me suis beaucoup étonné ces temps-ci de la façon d'agir employée par Schomburg à mon égard. Je me permets de vous l'exposer sans fard.

Un beau jour, je reçois de Mr. Arthur Schomburg une amicale lettre dans laquelle il me priaît de bien vouloir lui vendre un de mes manuscrits.

Trois ans de correspondance régulière et active avec les États-Unis m'ont appris à connaître leurs méthodes de "bluff" et à les employer quand besoin est.

Je réponds donc à Mr. Schomburg, en lui demandant un prix volontairement excessif, —15,000 dollars,—car tout me douuait à penser que ce chiffre serait et devait être discuté. Je pensais même que nous serions parvenus à nous mettre d'accord sur 2,500 à 3,000 dollars.

Mr. Schomburg m'a répondu en me disant qu'il m'offrait 15 dollars. Je vous avoue que j'avais d'abord lu 1500 dollars et non 15.00, car il ne pouvait me venir à l'esprit, élevé que j'ai été à la française, que quelqu'un que j'ai reçu de mon mieux chez-moi, put se permettre de m'écrire avec une si ironique insoulerce.

J'apprécie pourtant cette ironie à sa valeur, et elle me servira de leçon, ma bienveillance n'allant pas jusqu'à imbécillité totale. . . . [sic]

En fin avril, je consacrerai un long et copieux article dans le *Journal du Peuple* sur votre *New Negro* et le mouvement social des noirs d'Amérique.

Je profiterai de l'occasion pour dire toute l'admiration que j'ai pour l'homme que vous êtes mon cher Locke. Mais je lancerai aussi quelque flèches à ces pseudo-leaders raciaux, qui ne sont que les mercantis de leur race.

Que voulez-vous, il a bien fallu que je me rende compte de cette vérité un peu pénible. Voilà plus de trois ans que les uns et les autres s'appliquent à m'ouvrir les yeux. Et si m'avisais de dire, en France, tout ce que leurs actes m'inspirent. . . . [sic] Hélas! on n'est jamais trahi que par les siens. . . . [sic]

He returned to it two months later in another letter dated May 30, 1927: "Je ne suis pas encore arrivé à digérer l'ironique et injurieuse proposition de Schomburg. M'offrir deux cents francs pour le manuscrit de *Djouma*, que j'ai mis plus d'un an à composer! En tout cas, qu'il ne

82. Letter in Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. All the letters discussed in this section are in the above-mentioned collection.

remette jamais plus les pieds chez moi." He alluded to the same affair constantly in his subsequent correspondence and discussions about Afro-Americans.

René Maran's relationship with the New Negro of the 1920's was essentially promotional. It was a sort of scratch-my-back-and-I-will-scratch-your-back affair. What his Afro-American friends attempted to do for him in the United States of America he also tried to do for them in France. If he appears to have done more for them than they have done for him, it is because their products were more *à la mode* in France than his (at least after *Batouala*) were in the United States. Besides, obviously knowing less than he thought he knew about Americans and their way of life, he was often open to errors of judgement—errors which, in the United States of America, negated not only his effectiveness as the foremost black writer of the period, but also the ability of his American friends to effectively promote and protect his interest. Nevertheless, he was very close to the New Negro. He studiously watched his growth; he helped to reveal his aims and achievements to the French public.

Gwendolyn B. Bennett of *Opportunity* must have exaggerated when she referred to her conversation with Maran about lynching, and exclaimed, "It was a beautiful thing to note the kindredship that existed in his heart because of the irradicable black of our skins." René Maran was *not* a "race man." It is significant that he also told her "that in a like manner the white Frenchmen could in no way understand the toleration of such cruelty in a civilized community." Yet Miss Bennett was absolutely correct when she informed the readers of her column that "M. Maran is extremely interested in the American situation, and is constantly writing in French journals and magazines critical notes on the recent literature and cultural advance of the American Negro."<sup>83</sup>

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83. Gwendolyn B. Bennett, "The Ebony Flute," *Opportunity*, V, 8 (Aug. 1927), 243.

## *Politics, Culture and Literary Form in Black Africa*

by BERNTH LINDFORS

THE NEW literatures in English and French that have emerged in black Africa in the twentieth century have been profoundly influenced by politics. Indeed, one could argue that they have been generated and shaped by the same forces that have transformed much of the African continent during the past hundred years. Writers have served not only as chroniclers of contemporary political history but also as advocates of radical social change. Their works thus both reflect and project the course of Africa's cultural revolution.

Paradoxically, an African literature written in a European language is likely to be a more accurate barometer of fluctuations in national circumstances and mood than a literature written in an African language. One of the ironies of multilingualism in Africa is that the extraordinary number and variety of languages in most sub-Saharan nations make communication across ethnic and international boundaries difficult in anything but a colonial tongue. The writer who chooses to express himself in an African language will be addressing his message to a relatively small audience, merely a fraction of the total literate population in his country. Moreover, he may have to submit his work to prior censorship by church or state because missionary and government publishers may offer the only opportunities for publication in that language. Since such publishers tend to be interested primarily in providing reading matter for use in schools, an aspiring author may find himself compelled to write for young people instead of adults. In other words, he may be tongue-tied by the institutional constraints that inhibit open literary expression in his mother tongue.

An African author who chooses to write in a colonial language—particularly English or French—will be able to reach a much larger audience both at home and abroad and will not be prevented from articulating mature ideas that the church, state or school finds offensive. As a consequence, what he writes will be far more representative of the intellectual climate of his time and place than anything written in a local language for a smaller, younger and less heterogeneous audience. He will be creating a national literature because he will be communicating in a national language rather than an ethnic idiom,<sup>1</sup> and the international

1. Chinua Achebe distinguishes between national and ethnic literatures in his essay "English and the African Writer," *Transition*, No. 18 (1965), p. 27.

scope of his adopted tongue will carry his voice still farther. Only through European linguistic means will he be able to work effectively toward pan-African cultural ends.

The Negritude writers were the first to prove this point. When asked why he and other francophone African poets wrote in French, Léopold Sédar Senghor replied:

Because we are cultural half-castes, because, although we feel as Africans, we express ourselves as Frenchmen, because French is a language with a universal vocation, because our message is addressed to the Frenchmen of France as well as to other men, because French is a language of "graciousness and civility." . . . I know what its resources are because I have tasted and digested and taught it, and it is a language of the gods. Listen to Corneille, La Fontaine, Rimbaud, Péguy and Claudel. Listen to the great Hugo. The French language is a mighty organ capable of all tones and of all effects, from the softest mildness to the fulgurations of the storm. It is one by one, or all together, flute and oboe, trumpet and cannon. Again, French has given us the gift of its abstract words, so rare in our mother tongues, by which tears turn into precious stones. With us, words are naturally surrounded by an aura of sap and blood. French words are radiant with a thousand fires, like diamonds. Flares lighting up our night.<sup>2</sup>

It was necessary to use such a combustible vehicle to bring home the explosive cultural message of Negritude "to the Frenchmen of France as well as to other men." Only a "language of the gods" could fully express the nuances of the new mythology that the "cultural half-castes" of French West Africa and the Antilles were beginning to propagate. Senghor and his apostles knew that one couldn't win converts to a syncretic pan-Negro faith by preaching only in Serer. The flares of French were needed to bring light to the entire black diaspora.

It is significant that the literary form chosen most often to carry this new message was the surrealist poem. This form, with its powerful analogical strategies of rhythm, image and symbol, not only epitomized what Senghor regarded as the essence of African verbal art,<sup>3</sup> it also simultaneously linked African creativity with a respected, albeit once avant-garde, mode of European poetic expression. Negritude poetry was thus something both new and old, both freshly inventive yet recognizably imitative, a cross-cultural poetry in a quasi-familiar hybrid form that blended and synthesized two disparate artistic traditions into a harmoniously integrated whole. Like the poets themselves, Negritude poems were cultural assimilados readily accepted in French intellectual circles. They may have appeared quaint and picturesque to some European readers,<sup>4</sup> but their very accessible exoticism made them quite exciting to others. The ideology of Negritude probably would not have made such a strong impact on the French-speaking world had it not been

2. Léopold Sédar Senghor, "Modern African Poets," in *Léopold Sédar Senghor: Prose and Poetry*, ed. and trans. John Reed and Clive Wake (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 94-95.

3. For a discussion of Senghor's ideas about poetry, see Sylvia Washington Bâ, *The Concept of Negritude in the Poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973).

4. Senghor comments on this in "Modern African Poets," pp. 90-91.

packaged in such an impeccably "civilized" form. Surrealism was a very elegant mode of protest.

The Negritude poets were thus proving their right to be taken seriously by introducing new ideas in a manner Europe understood and appreciated. Their argument had philosophical depth, interesting cultural implications, and rock-hard Cartesian lucidity. Like leaders of earlier French intellectual movements, the founding fathers of Negritude had issued a manifesto and were proceeding to generate literary evidence to support their position. Since surrealist poetry alone could not convey their ideas with sufficient precision, they also wrote essays attempting to define and elaborate key concepts. These efforts paid off handsomely. In no time at all Negritude gained recognition as both an ideology and a mystique in the best French dialectical tradition.

Even latter-day critics of Negritude—and there are many, particularly in anglophone Africa—acknowledge its historical importance. Most would agree with Stanislas Adotevi's assertion that

although certain aspects may seem old-fashioned and with frankly reactionary objectives, we should consider [the era of Negritude] as a primitive period necessary to the African renaissance. . . . At a time when the whole world was given over to racialism . . . at a time when the whole of humanity raised voice in competitive cacophony, there was a single pistol-shot in the middle of this concert—negritude. It shook a few consciences and brought a few negroes together, and this was a good thing.<sup>5</sup>

However, it is doubtful that this shot would have made such an impact if the pistol had been manufactured entirely in Africa. It took a European instrument in skilled African hands to shock the world into greater awareness of the humanity of colonized black peoples.

After Negritude had done its work, the surrealist poem and philosophical essay gave way in French West Africa to another literary form: the satirical novel. Anti-colonial humor in fiction by Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono, Bernard Dadié, and even Camara Laye (in some of the lugubriously hallucinated episodes in *Le Regard du roi*) set the dominant tone of the Fifties. The change in form and mood suited the temper of the times. Now that colonialism was moribund, one could afford to laugh at colonizer and colonized alike, pointing out absurd aspects of their interaction. Since it was no longer necessary to demonstrate that Africans were human beings, one could relax a bit and depict them as no better and no worse than Europeans, who certainly weren't saints. One didn't have to romanticize the past or pretend that villages in Africa were more wholesome morally than cities in Europe. The fact that independence was just around the corner made self-confident self-criticism and joking possible. Instead of striving to impress the colonial master, one now had license to tickle him, even if the last laugh was at

5. Stanislas Adotevi, "Negritude is Dead: The Burial," *Journal of the New African Literature and the Arts*, Nos. 7/8 (1969-70), pp. 74-75. Adotevi's views on Negritude are elaborated in *Négritude et négrologues* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1972).

his own expense. Satirical fiction may have helped to ease social and political tensions in French West Africa prior to independence by comically deflating some of the issues that had been blown out of proportion during the Negritude era. The ironic needle now spoke louder than the pistol-shot.

In English-speaking West Africa the novel also emerged as the dominant literary form at the end of the colonial period, but it was a very different kind of novel. Writers there were more serious about their work and seldom cracked a smile. Like the earlier Negritude advocates, they sought to create a dignified image of the African past, but they were careful not to glorify the precolonial era as a Golden Age. According to Chinua Achebe, the most influential novelist of this period, the best way to "plead the cause of the past" was to project an "accurate but maybe unexciting image," not a romanticized one "which though beautiful is really a distortion." It was simply a matter of effective tactics. Achebe felt that "the credibility of the world [the writer] is attempting to recreate will be called to question and he will defeat his own purpose if he is suspected of glossing over inconvenient facts. We cannot pretend that our past was one long, technicolour idyll. We have to admit that like any other people's past ours had its good as well as its bad sides."<sup>6</sup>

Yet the kind of objectivity that Achebe and his followers tried to achieve in depicting traditional African village life was not devoid of political commitment. The writer was expected to argue a case against colonialism by showing the damage it had done in Africa. The novelist in particular was regarded as a teacher whose primary task was to reeducate his society to an acceptance of itself. He could accomplish this by strongly affirming the value of African culture. Achebe believed that the "fundamental theme" of the African writer should be

that African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African peoples all but lost during the colonial period, and it is this that they must now regain. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost.<sup>7</sup>

He could do this best by writing realistic fiction.

Most of the early anglophone West African novelists wrote sad stories of culture conflict. They would either show how a well-knit African community became divided after exposure to western institutions such as the church and school or else reveal how individuals suffered psychological distress because they had become "men of two worlds" who could not reconcile the African and western elements of their personal-

6. Chinua Achebe, "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation," *Nigeria Magazine*, No. 81 (1964), p. 158.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

ity. Either things fell apart in the villages or people fell apart in the cities. In both cases Africa was no longer at ease because a collision with Europe had knocked it off balance. The legacy of colonialism was cultural confusion, and it was virtually impossible to find stable moral values in societies or individuals mired in such a mess. Contrary to western colonial mythology, Europe did not bring light, peace and justice to the Dark Continent; it brought chaos to what had once been a well-ordered world. This was the theme that preoccupied the first generation of anglophone West African novelists. They were attempting to rewrite African history in their fiction, and to do so effectively, they chose to express themselves in a manner that could not be misunderstood. Plain prose was a more powerful mode of protest for them than abstract poetry.

By the mid-Sixties, only a few years after independence had been achieved, the popular mood in West Africa had changed to such an extent that new political institutions began to spring up to supplant the parliamentary forms of democracy hastily bequeathed to Africa as Europe departed. First it was the one-party state, then the military junta, that dominated the scene. Africans who had followed their nationalist leaders into independence became disenchanted with them afterwards and sought to bring them down. Since increasing centralization of power within the new nation-state made this difficult to accomplish through constitutional means, the army often played a key role in effecting political change. Bullets replaced ballots as instruments of governance, and in at least one country post-coup conflicts deteriorated into full-scale civil war. The pre-independence dream of a brave new world had turned into a nasty post-colonial nightmare.

During this period West African writers could not ignore what they saw around them. The novel remained their major literary outlet but they used it now as a vehicle of strong social and political satire. Instead of continuing to reconstruct the dignity of the African past, they turned their attention to the ugliness of the present and began to point the finger of blame at Africans themselves instead of Europeans. Wole Soyinka, who switched from drama to fiction during this period, exclaimed that "the African writer needs an urgent release from the fascination of the past" if he is to fulfill his function "as the record of the mores and experience of his society *and* as the voice of vision in his own time."<sup>8</sup> Chinua Achebe agreed, pointing out that "Most of Africa today is politically free; there are thirty-six independent African States managing their own affairs—sometimes very badly. A new situation has thus arisen. One of the writer's main functions has always been to expose and attack injustice. Should we keep at the old theme of racial injustice (sore as it still is) when new injustices have sprouted all around us? I

8. Wole Soyinka, "The Writer in an African State," *Transition*, No. 31 (1967), p. 13.

think not." The "black writer's burden," Achebe argued, was "to express our thought and feeling, even against ourselves, without the anxiety that what we say will be taken as evidence against our race."<sup>9</sup> In other words, the political battle at home was now far more important than the cultural struggle abroad.

This new emphasis has continued into the Seventies, with novelists alternating between slice-of-life realism and sardonic satire. In Nigeria, where more novels have been produced than in any other West African state, the center of focus in recent years has been the civil war experience. It is not surprising that most of this fiction has been written by Igbo, many of whom use Biafran soldiers as their heroes and choose mercenaries and other war profiteers as their villains. But these novels are not propagandistic in the narrow sense of the word. They tell of man's inhumanity to man but also of man's altruism, notably his willingness to sacrifice himself for others; in addition to human pettiness, stupidity, duplicity and greed, we are given examples of human courage, compassion, and devotion to an ideal. These novelists seem to be more concerned with comprehending the moral significance of actions taken during a civil war than with blaming the conflict on one side or another. This is a profoundly introspective literature even when attention is focused on surface details of combat and destruction. Themes of madness, terror and social dislocation serve to underscore the fragility of human civilizations, particularly when subjected to the kind of irreversible devastation wrought by calculated brutality. In such novels things and people do not fall apart; they are pummeled into oblivion by forces too powerful for them to withstand or else they try heroically to resist the cataclysmic dehumanization that is overtaking their world. It is not just groups of Africans backed by opposing European factions, not just Biafrans and Federalists, who are in conflict here; good and evil are at war.

Thus, in response to traumatic political and cultural changes since independence, anglophone West African writers have moved from an obsessive concern with the residual effects of colonialism in black Africa to a preoccupation with more universal themes rooted in more specific contemporary realities. In other words, there has been both a narrowing and a broadening of their range of interests. Instead of continuing to delineate the sociological and psychological damage suffered by Africans during the colonial encounter, they are now attempting to explore dimensions of the human condition by looking more closely at local examples of extreme situations. And they are doing this primarily through the medium of the novel, an elastic form that can accommodate many different approaches to reality but that has been exploited by these writers in basically two complementary ways: cynical satire (to

9. Chinua Achebe, "The Black Writer's Burden," *Presence Africaine*, No. 59 (1966), pp. 138-139.

deal with political corruption) and compassionate realism (to deal with the horrors of civil war). As before, both approaches involve speaking truths plainly so that everyone can easily understand what is being said.

In East Africa, writing in English got off to a slower start than in West Africa but production began to accelerate very rapidly in the late Sixties and early Seventies. The first major literary form to emerge was the novel, and in the hands of James Ngugi (now Ngugi wa Thiong'o) and his followers, it initially took essentially the same shape as its counterpart in West Africa. Ngugi's earliest novels, written just before independence, reexamined the colonial past, particularly the period that saw the rise of Gikuyu independent schools and the outbreak of the Mau Mau rebellion. Like Achebe, Ngugi felt that the novelist's work "is often an attempt to come to terms with 'the thing that has been,' a struggle, as it were, to sensitively register his encounter with history, his people's history."<sup>10</sup> The novelists who appeared immediately after Ngugi evidently shared this attitude for they too wrote historical fiction set in the relatively recent past.

Not long after independence, however, East Africa went through the same phase of political disillusionment that had infected West Africa, and novelists responded in the same way by turning their attention to contemporary times. Ngugi's analysis of this phenomenon echoes Achebe's earlier remarks but adds an interesting economic perspective:

The African writer was in danger of becoming too fascinated by the yesterday of his people and forgetting the present. Involved as he was in correcting his disfigured past, he forgot that his society was no longer peasant, with common ownership of means of production, with communal celebration of joy and victory, communal sharing of sorrow and bereavement; his society was no longer organized on egalitarian principles. Conflicts between the emergent elitist middle-class and the masses were developing, their seeds being in the colonial pattern of social and economic development. And when he woke up to his task he was not a little surprised that events in post-independence Africa could take the turn they had taken.<sup>11</sup>

Ngugi was one of the first in East Africa to wake up and write a serious indictment of the turn his nation had taken. He was followed by others who exposed post-independence political intrigues and social corruption in sharply satirical novels. As in West African fiction, the tendency now was to go beyond blaming Europe for introducing the cultural confusion that culminated in the collapse of modern Africa and begin accusing Africa of collaborating in its own destruction. The critical eye had turned inward.

The other major literary form that emerged in East Africa in the Sixties was the satirical song. In 1966 Okot p'Bitek published *Song of Lawino*, a long "lament" of an illiterate housewife deserted by her edu-

10. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "The Writer and His Past," in *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics* (New York: Lawrence Hill, 1972), p. 39.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

cated husband for an emancipated city girl. In registering her complaints against her husband and his "modern woman," Lawino strikes out at the nasty habits and illogical practices of westernized Africans, contrasting them with the natural dignity of traditional ways. Her song is an hilarious put-down of African "apemanship"<sup>12</sup> and a defense of the integrity of indigenous culture, but p'Bitek added interesting piquancy to her argument by making Lawino herself a target of some of the satire. In this manner p'Bitek both revived and undercut the debate about Africa's cultural confusion by placing it in a new comic context. Indeed, he went further and had Lawino's husband reply to her charges in *Song of Ocol*, a book-length lyric in which the technique of reflexive satire is even more pronounced. Unlike the sober-sided West Africans who wrote on such subjects, p'Bitek was ready to laugh at the twisted victims of Africa's collision with Europe. He saw them as sad but funny creatures crushed by a colossal absurdity.

The light touch that p'Bitek introduced into the discussion of heavy cultural issues struck a very responsive chord in East Africa. Imitators immediately sprang up and started singing similar songs. A streak of zany comedy entered the literature, providing a refreshing alternative to the serious indictments of the post-independence novelists. Today the satirical song is still one of the most popular literary forms in East Africa.

But it has not remained a static form. In the Seventies, singers gradually moved away from cultural to political themes, focusing their attention on some of the same problems preoccupying the novelists. Again p'Bitek led the way, composing in *Song of Prisoner* and *Song of Malaya* eloquent broadsides against a multitude of social and civic sins. The tone of these verbal assaults was still basically humorous, but the humor, particularly in *Song of Prisoner*, now had a bitter aftertaste, reflecting deepened political disillusionment. Also, Europe had vanished; Africa itself was now the epicenter of quaking satire.

Although the literary histories of West and East Africa outlined here are quite similar in certain respects, one significant difference should be underscored: East African writers have a greater propensity to laugh at evil. While West Africans brood or turn cynical when things go wrong in their society, East Africans seem to have a capacity to enjoy the incongruities of the moment, even when events conspire to work to their disadvantage. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the popular literature on Idi Amin Dada that has emerged in East Africa in recent years. One of the most interesting specimens of this Idi-otic genre is a beast fable entitled *The Amazing Saga of Field Marshall Abdulla Salim Fisi, or How the Hyena Got His* written by a Ugandan author under the pseudonym "Alumidi Osinya." A brief foreword states:

12. p'Bitek elaborates on this notion in an essay entitled "Pop Music, Bishops and Judges" in his book *Africa's Cultural Revolution* (Nairobi: Macmillan Books for Africa, 1973), pp. 1-5.

The point about the story that follows is that there really is perhaps no better way of talking about the rape of Africa by Africans themselves than the traditional African way of the "Why" or "How" animal story. This is how we told off our elders in the past. . . . This is how they told each other off, in a gentle, mild way. . . . Now, perhaps more than ever, when ruthless military dictators are the order of the day and shoot human beings as easily as they shoot the elephants in the National Parks (except that at least with elephants they get the tusks), now really is the time to try the mild, gentle way. Not though, in the Western sense, in the same way the British press, for instance, has regarded our excesses as buffoonery and just laughed them off while we continued needlessly to butcher each other. There is buffoonery, yes, but it's a mirthless, cruel buffoonery and although it may do us good to laugh at ourselves, let our eyes water too: this situation, partly of our own making, is so cruel that we need the sedative of laughter even to be able to look at it. And the effectiveness of the sedative can only be judged by the trickle of tears from the mirthless laughter.<sup>13</sup>

One reason why East African writing differs from West African writing is that East African authors have resorted more often to the sedative of tearful laughter. Even the harshest subjects have been treated in this "mild, gentle way."

Black South African authors, faced with a different set of political circumstances, have produced a literature bearing little resemblance to East or West African writing. Their first major literary form in English was the short story, which flourished in the Fifties but was nearly obliterated in the mid-Sixties by tough new censorship legislation. The writers themselves have explained that the pressures of life under apartheid rule, combined with extremely limited opportunities for publication in other forms, made the short story virtually the only literary outlet for "non-white" writers after 1948.<sup>14</sup> In the Fifties they wrote either romantic potboilers for *Drum* and other popular home magazines or else hard-hitting naturalistic vignettes for liberal, radical and communist publications. But both this frivolous escapist trash and this serious protest fiction fell victim to the repressive Publications and Entertainments Act of 1963, which gave the South African government power to ban anything it deemed immoral, objectionable or obscene. The most outspoken writers were blacklisted, placed under house arrest, and encouraged to leave South Africa permanently, and the publications that promoted blatant protest writing were quickly forced out of existence. Politically committed writers had to choose between silence and exile.

Those who opted for exile continued to write about South Africa but began to express themselves in a variety of literary forms. Foremost among these was the autobiography, which became the black refugee's favorite medium for articulating his outrage and frustration. Indeed, autobiographical writing almost turned into a tradition among newly-

13. Alumidi Osinya, *The Amazing Saga of Field Marshal Abdulla Salim Fisi, or How the Hyena Got His* (Nairobi: Joe Publications and Transafrica Book Distributors, 1977), pp. ix-x.

14. See, for example, Ezekiel Mphahlele, *The African Image* (London: Faber, 1962), p. 186; Bloke Modisane, "Short Story Writing in Black South Africa," *American Society of African Culture Newsletter*, V, 8 (1963), 3; Lewis Nkosi, "African Fiction: Part One, South Africa: Protest," *Africa Report*, VII, 9 (1962), 6.

exiled black South African intellectuals. Then, having got the experience of apartheid off their chest in this intensely personal way, they experimented with long fiction, drama and various types of poetry, sometimes commenting on the disorientations of exile but usually renewing their attacks on the evils of life back home. Escape from an oppressive environment and release of their long pent-up feelings of bitterness gave them the freedom to explore other modes of getting their message across. They had been liberated from the limitations of the short story.

Meanwhile, in black South Africa the urge for self-expression in English resurfaced in the Seventies in a new literary form—lyric poetry. The poetry movement got started in 1971 with the publication of Oswald Mtshali's *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*, which sold more than ten thousand copies in its first year. This was followed by increasingly militant books of poetry by others—Mongane Wally Serote, James Matthews, Sydney Sipho Sepamla, to name only the most prominent. At first the South African censors seemed willing to ignore these poets, possibly because their messages were more obliquely stated than those of the short story writers. Poetry can be more difficult to interpret than prose, and it would seem absurd, even in South Africa, to convict a poet for achieving a splendid ambiguity. What could a court of law do with evidence so slippery as that provided in a transparently simple poem like "The Notice on the Wall" by Peter Clarke?

It says clearly on that wall  
 "No Ballplaying Allowed."  
 But watch this little crowd  
 of boys  
 Disobey,  
 Again today,  
 That strict order.  
 They give vent  
 To one of their  
 Great joys  
 And kick their muddy ball  
 Against that pure-white  
 Upright wall.<sup>15</sup>

Oswald Mtshali was equally adept at making a political point through skilful use of irony, as can be seen in his poem "Boy on a Swing."

Slowly he moves  
 to and fro, to and fro,  
 then faster and faster  
 he swishes up and down.  
  
 His blue shirt  
 billows in the breeze  
 like a tattered kite.

15. Peter Clarke, "The Notice on the Wall," *Mundus Artium*, IX, 2 (1976), 49.

The world whirls by:  
 east becomes west,  
 north turns to south;  
 the four cardinal points  
 meet in his head.

Mother!

Where did I come from?  
 When will I wear long trousers?  
 Why was my father jailed?<sup>16</sup>

This is the kind of verse that says things plainly yet indirectly.

However, as more black poetry was published in South Africa, the messages gradually grew cruder and more direct. Instead of carrying figurative titles with subtle political undertones such as *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* (alluding to the percussive rhythm made by Zulu regiments as they marched into battle beating on their shields) or *Yakhal'inkomo* (the cry of cattle at the slaughter house), the books now had slogans for titles—*Cry Rage!* and *Black Voices Shout!* Soon the government stepped in and started banning such books. The most talented black poets—Mtshali and Serote—left the country and have not returned. Thus, in the Seventies, we have history repeating itself in South Africa: a literary movement that gave promise of articulating the discontents of blacks has been halted by heavy-handed government censorship. Black South African poets appear to have no alternative but to remain silent, turn to oral forms, or go into exile. Writing verse in their homeland will make them outlaws.

ONE SIGNIFICANT factor conditioning all African literatures written in European languages has been the audience to whom they have been addressed. In colonial West and East Africa writers tended to speak to Europe first and to their own people second; only after the struggle for independence had been won in principle (if not in fact) did they relax and entertain their countrymen as well as the outside world by laughing at themselves. However, as post-independence disillusionment spread, this laughter turned bitter and self-criticism became the rule. Then African writers spoke primarily to their own people and were no longer greatly concerned about the negative image of Africa their writings might project to outsiders. In this way, West and East African literatures became decidedly more Afrocentric in the post-colonial era.

In South Africa, on the other hand, African authors who expressed themselves in English got their start by writing for popular magazines and newspapers aimed at an indigenous African reading public. Only after leaving South Africa did they concern themselves with writing for a foreign audience; this was more a matter of necessity than preference

16. Oswald Joseph Mtshali, *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* (Johannesburg: Renoster, 1971), p. 3.

because as banned persons they could not get their works published or read in their motherland. Those who remained in South Africa continued to speak to their own people until the government made it virtually impossible for them to speak at all.

In black Africa, then, there have been basically two patterns of literary development in European languages since the second world war: the gradual Africanization of literary expression in West and East Africa as colonialism gave way to political self-determination, and the rapid de-Africanization of South African literary expression as repeated repression at home gave rise to a vigorous tradition of protest writing among exiled South Africans abroad. Writers in each area have chosen forms appropriate for conveying a political message to a particular audience and have switched to other forms when environmental conditions have altered. Thus, in morphology as well as ideology, literary art has been responsive to the winds of change that have swept across sub-Saharan Africa in the mid-twentieth century. The intellectual history of a continent undergoing rapid cultural transformation can be discerned in the significant mutations such literatures manifest.

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