



Volume VIII – Africa since 1935

Chapter 19 - The development of modern literature since 1935

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The period since the 1930s is precisely the era which has witnessed the most extensive flowering of written literature in Africa.¹ As formal education and literacy expanded, and African access to university education increased significantly, a reservoir of literate Africans was created from which new writers finally emerged. And an expanding pool of potential *readers* of and *listeners* to African literature came into being. Although the short story, the essay and the biography as literary genres were by no means insignificant, the most basic forms of creative literature in this period of African history were, first, poetry and rhetoric; secondly, drama and the theatre; and, thirdly, the novel. Perhaps the easiest to accommodate with indigenous tradition were rhetoric and poetry. Africa had had poets, orators and composers of songs almost since the beginning of language itself. The interplay between indigenous poetic and oratorical traditions and the new forms of the Western world was in many ways the least painful area of culture contact in literature.

¹ This chapter is greatly indebted to earlier work by A. A. Mazrui, especially A. A. Mazrui, 1975a, and A. A. Mazrui and M. Bakari, 1986a and 1986b

But if poetry was the most indigenous form of literature on the continent, the novel was the most alien. Even in the Western world the novel was primarily a product of the nineteenth century and of the industrial revolution. Of course *story-telling* as such was *primordial* in both the West and Africa. Hence the transition to short stories was not so difficult. *Griots* in West Africa go back at least a millennium. Complexity of material was not a problem. After all, very long and complex epics were told in Africa. But the novel as an art-form which fuses a single story with characterization, plot and narrative went beyond the conventions of the *griot*. Of all the literary forms which burst their way into Africa during European colonial rule, the novel was in many ways the most purely European.

This chapter discusses the main themes expressed in literature as they relate to the general history of Africa without attempting to give a complete overview of all aspects of literature. Changes of a formal or stylistic nature are not discussed, the history of literary circles, organizations and journals is not pursued, the complex filiation of influences and innovations cascading over their generations must be left aside.

Before a discussion of the main themes of African literature can be opened, a few words must first be said about the economic and technical constraints which have impeded and still hamper the production of literary works. The scarcity of presses, the absence of substantial publishing houses in most parts of the continent and the cost of books are major obstacles. Moreover, too few of the writers' countrymen and women can read European languages and even fewer can afford to buy books. The writer in African languages paradoxically faces similar problems. More readers of diverse walks of life can enjoy the texts, but their appeal is now limited by the language itself. This is not a problem for Arabic, but it is the tragedy of much writing in sub-Saharan African languages.

The new *oral* artists, and such composers still exist, are bypassed in literary surveys because they are contemporary, yet expressing themselves in a mode associated with archaism. Moreover, they reach only those who listen to them. Thus even today African oral authors still suffer from the lack of a diversified African audience, and this in turn affects the authors. Since they can rarely take part in dialogue, they are condemned to soliloquy. Too often they write for a handful of peers, or for localized audiences. A high proportion of authors and narrators in the oral tradition are *women* with great verbal skills and virtuosity, in both verse and storytelling. Grace Ogot's early writings had links with a much older Luo tradition of oral narrative.

On poetry and politics

We shall return to the novel later, but let us first examine that most indigenous literary form – poetry. One of the most important aspects of African poetry in this period was the link with *political* experience. Several factors went towards forging this linkage. One factor was the phenomenon of cultural nationalism itself. Connected with this was the use of proverbs in traditional discourse. Yet another factor in the African poetic experience in this period was the impact of the Bible and the Kur’ān as sources of poetic inspiration. But underlying all these was the role of *emotion* as a basic element in both poetry and certain forms of political appeal.

Among the peoples of Africa perhaps none has had a body of poetry more closely linked to *nationalism* than the Somali. John Drysdale was once startled by how Somali nationalism was fostered by ‘the national appeal of the Somali poetry’. And Colin Legum soon discovered that because of the longing for Somali reunification, Somali poetry was often ‘strongly tinged with ideas of “amputation” and “the dismemberment” of the Somali nation’.² Poetry by Somali women is less politicized, but by no means divorced from patriotism.

A different kind of cultural nationalism erupted among Africans in Paris in the 1930s. Partly inspired by surrealism as a rebellion against the tyranny of language and bourgeois art, Francophone Africans in Paris initiated a rebellion against the colonization of the African mind, but in a European frame of reference.³ The French imperial policy of cultural assimilation provoked the African response of *negritude*. It turned out to be a pan-African experience of unique significance. African and Caribbean writers forged an alliance of poetry to lament their own dislocation from ancestry and affirm the validity of tradition and African authenticity. The alliance between Aimé Césaire of Martinique and Léopold Sédar Senghor was a particularly important foundation of the literary movement of *negritude*. Indeed, Aimé Césaire invented the word ‘*negritude*’, and then embarked on what Nietzsche would have called a ‘transvaluation of values’. Aimé Césaire applauded and said ‘Hooray’ to the following:

Those who have invented neither powder nor the compass,
Those who have tamed neither gas nor electricity,
Those who have explored neither the seas nor the skies . . .
My *negritude* is not a rock, its deafness hurled against the clamour of the day,
My *negritude* is not a thing of dead water on the dead eye of the earth;
My *negritude* is neither a tower nor a cathedral:
It plunges into the red flesh of the earth.⁴

² J. Drysdale, 1964, p. 15; and C. Legum, 1963, p. 505.

³ W. Soyinka, 1985, p. 564.

⁴ This rendering in English is from S. W. Allen’s translation of J.-P. Sartre, 1963, PP. 41–3.

Writers like Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo (Malagasy), Tchicaya U Tam'si (Congo) and Yambo Ouologuem (Mali) joined the literary African forces against European cultural imperialism and in favour of African cultural vindication.

The forces of poetry and of politics were joined. In the earlier years of this period it was not clear whether we were witnessing poets with an interest in politics or politicians with an interest in poetry. It has been pointed out often enough that Léopold Senghor of Senegal was a poet, Keita Fodeba of Guinea a producer of ballets, Bernard Dadié of the Côte d'Ivoire a novelist and Cofi Gadeau a playwright, before they held political office in their respective countries. In those early years it was difficult to draw a line between the artist and the activist, between the poet and the politician.⁵

In the fusion between art and agitation, certain African magazines played a decisive role for a while. These included *Présence Africaine* (Paris), *Black Orpheus* (Ibadan) and *Transition* (Kampala and Accra).⁶

Are *oratory and rhetoric* a branch of literature? They definitely can be – especially in societies of the oral tradition. Let us turn to a special kind of fusion between oratory and poetry.

⁵ For the Francophone phenomenon, consult T. Hodgkin and R. Schachter, 1960, P. 387.

⁶ See especially P. Benson, 1986.

Foreign art and African activism

Oratory and rhetoric definitely are flourishing branches of African literature. No one who ever heard Patrice Lumumba's impassioned pleas can ever doubt this. No one swayed by al-Nasser's rhetoric will ever forget it. But, alas, a record of most such performances has not survived.

Until independence, the African activist who used art for political oratory did not limit himself to indigenous art. The African politician who used poetry for political rhetoric did not limit himself to indigenous poetry either. Just as the frontier between art and activism was blurred, so was the frontier between the indigenous and the imported. Africa conscripted European languages and literature for the cause of African liberation and rhetoric.

Intimately linked is Africa's love for *the sound of words*. One of the first warnings which young Nnamdi Azikiwe pronounced on his return to Nigeria from the US was a warning against what he called 'the byproducts of an imitative complex'. He urged his countrymen to go 'beyond the veneer of knowledge', and he emphasized that 'ability to quote Shakespeare or Byron or Chaucer does not indicate original scholarship'.⁷

Chinua Achebe, Nigeria's leading novelist, points at his countrymen's love for the sound of big words in a speech he allocates to the president of Omuafia Progressive Union in the novel *No Longer at Ease*. And in a play by Wole Soyinka, Nigeria's leading playwright and Nobel-Prize winner, a teacher assails the custom of paying 'bride price' with a series of long high-sounding English words – 'and only stopped because he had only the Shorter Companion Dictionary – the longer edition which he had ordered hadn't arrived'.⁸

The literary critic Donatus Nwoga refers to certain characters in Nigeria's market literature – and the satire of high-sounding words:

In *Veronica, My Daughter*, Chief Jombo, feeling that Veronica, his daughter, and Pauline, his wife, were trying to browbeat him with their superior knowledge of the English language, sent for Bomber Billy, reputed for the bomb words he could throw . . . This concatenation of bombasts would be greatly effective on stage in Nigeria where big words do make an impact.⁹

⁷ From a speech given in November 1934 in Lagos. See N. Azikiwe, 1961, p. 23.

⁸ See W. Soyinka, 1963.

⁹ D. Nwoga, 1965, pp. 28–9.

In addition to the sound of words, foreign literature was attractive as a source of wit – ‘to point a moral or adorn a tale’. European literature was made subject to the laws of conversation of indigenous African languages. Conversational wit in many African languages postulates a ready command of diverse proverbs. As a Yoruba proverb has put it: ‘A wise man who knows proverbs reconciles difficulties’.¹⁰ Proverbs are also the staple of oratory.

The indigenous love of proverbs was transferred to quotations from foreign literature. Donatus Nwoga tells us about an Igbo dictum that to make a *speech* without using proverbs is like trying to climb a palm tree without a climbing rope. Nwoga then goes on to make a connection between traditional proverbs and Shakespearean quotations in contemporary Africa. He says:

I suggest that the tendency towards supporting one’s statements with proverbs might have carried over into this market literature in the form of using quotations. In *Veronica, My Daughter*, between pages 20 and 23, there are quotations from Richard Whateley, William Shakespeare, G. A. Gallock, Rudyard Kipling, Benjamin Harrison, William Ernest Henley and Henry Longfellow; and before the end of the story there are further quotations from Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe and some unknown poet . . . ¹¹

But quotations were important not only for *conversation* but also for *political anti-colonial oratory*. Africa’s new activists were often straining to be literary.

European colonial powers in Africa in the first half of the twentieth century – though sensitive to ‘sedition’ and ‘subversion’ – underestimated the political implications of those poetically expressed ideas. The late Chief Obafemi Awolowo once confessed in his autobiography: ‘Some of the mighty lines of Shakespeare must have influenced my outlook on life’.¹² In Uganda, young Apollo Obote adopted a new first name, Milton, out of admiration for the author of the British classical poem, *Paradise Lost*. And in the Gold Coast in 1934, young Kwame Nkrumah was applying to the Dean of Lincoln University in the US for admission. In his application, Nkrumah quoted from Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*:

So many worlds, so much to do,
So little done, such things to be.

In his autobiography more than 20 years later, Nkrumah confirmed that this verse ‘was to me then, and is it still is today, an inspiration and a spur. It fired within me a determination to equip myself for the service of my country’.¹³

¹⁰ See Introduction in C. Leslau and W. Leslau, 1962.

¹¹ D. Nwoga, 1965, p. 31.

¹² ‘Shakespeare is my favourite. I have read all his plays, and have re-read some of them – like *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *The Tempest*, *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *Henry V* - more than three times. Some of the mighty lines of Shakespeare must have influenced my outlook on life.’ See O. Awolowo, 1960, p. 70.

¹³ K. Nkrumah, 1957, p.v.

Significant also was the longest and 'in some respects the most important speech' that mature Premier Nkrumah made before independence. The speech was made on 12 November 1956. He was asking the National Assembly to approve his government's Revised Constitutional Proposals for the Gold Coast's independence. Nkrumah opened his speech with a reference to Edmund Burke's remark: 'We are on a conspicuous stage and the world marks our demeanour'. Nkrumah asserted: 'Never has this been truer than today. How we conduct ourselves when we become independent will affect not only Ghana but the whole of Africa'.¹⁴

Kwame Nkrumah concluded his speech with Wordsworth's immortal lines about the French Revolution of 1789. Nkrumah said: 'I hope that someday, somewhere, we also may be able to say with William Wordsworth:

*Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven!* ¹⁵

We might therefore conclude that either directly, or by kindling a new interest in local styles of argumentation, European literature generally is part of the genesis of the linkage between art and activism in Africa. Just as African nationalists used European languages for new purposes of political struggle, so also for a while they used European literature for the same nationalistic goals. European poetry afforded quotations for use in those early days of the newly aggressive African intellectualism. Foreign literature inspired a paradoxical form of cultural nationalism among the new wave of African freedom-fighters. It afforded a new discourse by proverbs. It often merged with the Bible or the Kur'ān, or with Christian and Islamic hymns, to provide additional stimuli to Africa's sensibilities. Both European literature and European languages provided the basis of some of the emerging oratory of this period of African history. If oratory and rhetoric are a branch of literature, this phase was a striking mixture of foreign poetry and African rhetoric.

¹⁴ K. Nkrumah, 1961, p. 71.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 84; the italics are Nkrumah's.

Tom Mboya of Kenya once recited Rudyard Kipling's poem *If* in its entirety before a huge crowd. It was the eve of an election in Nairobi. The crowd was waiting to hear Mboya's last pre-election speech. Mboya burst into foreign poetry:

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same,
If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue
Or walk with kings – nor lose the common touch,
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And – which is more, you'll be a Man, my son.¹⁶

There in Nairobi was this immortal son of Kenya, worn out by the exertions of campaigning, nervous about the election the next day, confronting an eager audience of fellow black people listening to his words of wisdom. Mboya was later to communicate to posterity the following paragraph:

I read out to the great crowd the whole of Rudyard Kipling's poem, *If*. When facing the challenge of nation-building nobody can claim to have played a manly part if he (or she) has not ' . . . filled the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds' worth of distance run'.¹⁷

Again two branches of literature were interacting – poetry and rhetoric. The poetry was foreign and imperial, the oratory and rhetoric were deeply African.

Kipling, the poet of 'The White Man's Burden', had become the poet of 'The Black Man's Ambition'. On the one hand, European literature was colonizing the African mind. On the other hand, when Rudyard Kipling's poetry was mobilized in the service of Africa, it was a case of Rudyard Kipling being *decolonized*. It was Kipling himself who said in 1923: 'Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind'.¹⁸

But it is in the nature of nationalism in Africa, as elsewhere, to be economical and sparing in its acknowledgement to foreign inspiration – be that inspiration poetic or ideological, Shakespearean or Leninist. If it be asked why nationalism should be so inhibited in acknowledging its debt, the reply might best be given by Zimbabwe's veteran politician, Ndabaningi Sithole. His answer rests on the premise that nationalism has a

¹⁶ R. Kipling, 1903.

¹⁷ T. Mboya, 1963b, p. 114.

¹⁸ In a speech on 14 February 1923: see *The Times*, 16 February 1923.

strong elemental force of sheer ambition – and his answer is directly Shakespearean. Why are the imperial literary origins of modern African nationalism not acknowledged by the nationalists? Ndabaningi Sithole quotes:

But 'tis a common proof,
That lowliness is young ambition's ladder,
Whereto the climber upward turns his face;
But when he once attains the upmost round,
He then unto the ladder turns his back,
Looks in the clouds, scorning the base degrees
By which he did ascend.¹⁹

The African orator had arrived at the rich mines of European literature. The orator saw, conquered – and took. And then climbed upwards.

¹⁹W. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, II, 1; quoted by N. Sithole, 1959, p. 57. See also J. S. Coleman, 1963, pp. 114–15.

The muse of liberation

But not all African activists used borrowed foreign poetry for nationalistic African purposes. Some of the new activists and liberation fighters were themselves poets or other kinds of creative writers. Some created workshops or cultural organizations to promote wider literary creativity. Among these must be counted Agostinho Neto, later destined to be the founder-president of independent Angola.

In the winter of 1948–9, a number of militant ‘exiles’ got together in Lisbon. The group was small – consisting of Amilcar Cabral (1924–73), Vasco Cabral, Marcelino dos Santos, Mario de Andrade and Agostinho Neto (1922–79). The intellectuals were reading poetry and discussing literature when Neto interrupted to say:

Today I received a letter from my friend Viriato da Cruz – perhaps you have heard of him. He is one of our poets. He says they have organized a cultural center [in Luanda] and named it ‘Let’s Discover Angola’. He also writes that they’re going to do studies on African history and popular art, write stories and poems, and use the profits from the sale of publications to help talented and needy writers. I think we could also do this here in Lisbon. There are many people here who can write poetry and short stories, not only about student life, but also about our native countries – Angola, Mozambique, and the islands of Cape Verde and São Tomé.²⁰

In the 1950s, Neto, Cabral and Mario de Andrade secretly established a Centre for African Studies (*Centro de Estudos Africanos*) with a broad agenda for promoting the study of colonized black people, including the study and promotion of creative African literature. A literary wing of the enterprise was the *Casa dos Estudantes do Imperio*. In 1951 two works on creative literature were issued – *Linha do Horizonte* (‘The Horizon Line’) by Aguinaldo Fonseca (Cape Verde) and the anthology *Poesia em Moçambique* edited by Orlando de Albuquerque and Victor Everisto. Among the most notable of the 25 writers from Mozambique represented in the volume were Orlando Mendes, Noemia de Sousa and Fonesca Amaral.

Art and activism once again interacted. The Salazar regime in Lisbon, reacting to the militant anti-imperialism of post-war Africa, suppressed the *Casa dos Estudantes do Imperio* from 1952 to 1957. After its revival in 1957 it still clashed periodically with the authorities until it was closed down completely in 1965.

The word ‘African’ was once forbidden when referring to the ‘overseas Portuguese provinces’. When referring to the spread of African traditions, colonial writers had to resort to the jargon of ‘the spreading of overseas cultural values’. Ideas of negritude in Lusophone Africa therefore came like a breath of fresh air. Some of the poetry exploded in wild physical abandon:

²⁰ O. Ignatiev, 1975, p. 15; English translation from M. Ferreira, 1986, pp. 398–9

And I lift up into the equinox of my land
the ruby of the most beautiful Ronga song;
And on the rare whiteness of the loins of dawn
the caress of my beautiful savage fingers
Is like the tacit harmony of spears in the rut of the race,
Beautiful as the phallus of another man,
Erect within the nervous womb of the African night.²¹

Craveirinha – perhaps Mozambique’s most prominent non-white poet – was arrested in 1964 when war broke out in his land. But the imperial order could not silence either him or Agostinho Neto – even if the poetry had to be published far from Portugal’s reach. Both Craveirinha’s and Neto’s poems appeared in Italy in 1966, for example. Activism and art continued to be dramatically fused.²²

A more complex relationship between art and activism, between poetry and politics, lay in the mind of Léopold Sédar Senghor. On the one hand, Senghor sought to rescue African culture from the contemptuous arrogance of Europe. On the other hand, Senghor fell in love with the country which colonized his own. In Senghor’s own words:

Lord, among the white nations, set France at the right hand of the Father.
O, I know she too is Europe, that she has stolen my children like a brigand to
fatten her cornfields and cottonfields, for the negro is dung.
She too has brought death and guns into my blue villages, has set my people one
against the other, like dogs fighting over a bone . . .
Yes, Lord, forgive France who hates her occupiers and yet lays so heavy an
occupation upon me . . .
For, I have a great weakness for France.²³

We do have in Léopold Senghor a perfect illustration of the fusion between poetic rebellion and political collaboration, the quest for African authenticity combined with the imperial legacy of Africa’s cultural dependency. Meanwhile a Namibian *guerilero* still asks in a series of rhetorical questions that roll one into the other, and are left for the reader to answer:

Shall we meet again at home
To talk and sing again
To walk and sit again

²¹ J. Craveirinha, 1964, p. 15; the English rendering is from A. S. Gerard, 1986, pp. 407–8.

²² See C. Wauthier, 1966.

²³ L. S. Senghor, 1965, pp. 135–6.

In our homes?
Shall we meet at home?
What a meeting it shall be!
Shall we meet again in the land of our love?
In the land of our dear hope?
Shall we meet again at home
And end the longing for home
And send the wronging home
And from sorrow ever be free? ²⁴

In the case of people like Neto and Senghor, it is impossible to be sure whether we are studying political animals who became literary or literary creatures who became political. But with people like the younger Nkrumah and his Tennyson, or Awolowo and his Shakespeare, or Obote and his Milton, we are more sure that we are examining political animals who drew from literature. Even as president of Tanzania after independence, Julius K. Nyerere was, as we indicated elsewhere in this volume, sufficiently literary to embark on the task of translating into Kiswahili two of Shakespeare's plays – *The Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Caesar*.

But while politicians like Mboya and Awolowo in the latter years of colonialism and early years of independence were indeed tempted to go literary, writers throughout this period since 1935 have often been tempted to be political. Earlier African activists often touched base with art; latter-day artists have increasingly touched base with activism. It is to this latter category of politicized writers (as distinct from literary politicians) that we must now turn.

²⁴ C. O'Brien Winter, 1977, p. 223.

Authenticity: seven themes of conflict

Our discussion of the history of literature in Africa could not entirely be separated from more general thematic issues, but in this section we shall examine more closely some of the central areas of literary focus during that period.

A number of inter-related conflicts of values manifested themselves in African writings. One was the conflict between the African past and the African present. Quite often, themes of this kind betrayed a deep nostalgia, an idealization of what once was, or might have been.

Related to this is the conflict between tradition and modernity. That is not quite the same as the first conflict, since the dialectic between tradition and modernity can be taking place in the same historical period. It certainly continues to unfold in the Africa of today.

The third dialectic, again intimately related but by no means identical, is the conflict between the indigenous and the foreign. Indigenous traditions may struggle for supremacy with imported foreign traditions. A debate was also under way as to whether there could be a distinctly African approach to modernization which did not at the same time involve Westernization.

The fourth dialectic in the literature of this period, and indeed of the future, is the apparent conflict between the individual and society, between private rights and public duty.

The fifth dialectic which did not really gather momentum in Africa until the 1960s was the grand dilemma between socialism and capitalism, between the pursuit of equity and the quest for affluence.

The sixth, and intimately related dialectic, concerns the apparent dilemma between development and self-reliance, between rapid economic change with foreign help on one side and slower but autonomous progress on the other.

The seventh dialectic is the even more fundamental one between Africanity and humanity, between the rights of Africans as members of a particular race or inhabitants of a particular continent and the duties of Africans as members of the human race.

The first theme of nostalgia for the past has points in common with the whole movement of negritude in parts of French-speaking Africa. There is an idealization of ancestry, and sometimes an obsession with dance and rhythm as aspects of ancestral culture. A striking example is *Le regard du roi* by Camara Laye. Jomo Kenyatta, though Anglophone, belonged to this mood not only as a writer but also as president of Kenya. Literally to his last day of life he was a patron of traditional dancers, spending many hours in the course of his presidency watching dancers from different cultural backgrounds, and sometimes participating with them. This obsession with dance was a

musical and artistic manifestation of cultural nostalgia. In Kenyatta's view: 'It is the culture which he inherits that gives a man his human dignity.'²⁵

Kenyatta's ethnic compatriot, Joe Mutiga, addresses the fig tree in a similar mood:

Holy huge trees, you tax my memory:
Over you boys awaiting circumcision
Proudly threw '*ndorothi*' to show ability
To shoulder social responsibility,
While all dance in heartfelt joy,
Bearing proudly the tribal decorum:

.

A memory of olden days
When the Agikuyu were a tribe,
Though now but part of a nation . . .
. . . the beauty of old is gone.²⁶

A longing for the past in Africa is interwoven with values of tradition as against modernity. Some of the writers and poets of this period were all too aware that dancing for rain was a less efficient way of increasing productivity than learning how to use a tractor. But the more romantic of the poets still longed for those rhythms of rural incantation, the music of supplication rather than the voice of an exhaust pipe. Joseph Waiguru, another Makerere graduate, wrote a kind of ode to the 'Round Mud Hut' – a poem which was broadcast on the BBC African Service and on the old Radio Uganda. In the poem he sees the mud hut as a shared refuge for humans and their animals; for adults and their children. But the round mud hut is under siege – the forces of modernized accommodation, separating parents from children in their different rooms, humans from their animals in stables, segregating the inhabitants of the otherwise shared earth.

The round warm hut
Proud to the last
Of her noble sons
And daughters
Stands besieged.
Of late stones,

²⁵ J. Kenyatta, 1938; for this section on authenticity, the author is greatly indebted to previous collaboration with M. Bakari of the University of Nairobi.

²⁶ J. Mutiga, 1965, p. 132; see also I. N. Shariff, 1988.

In tripartite agreement
Guarded a fire
And then a pot,
A large hot pot
Which nurtured
Black, black children
...
The bleating sheep
And the horned goat,
Calves cud-chewing
At the end penned,
Share the warmth
Of the round mud hut.
All this and much more.
Slowly and slowly disappears:
Slowly and slowly iron appears
Lays a siege on the roof
And takes prisoner of the gourd.
The plate, the cup, the lamp,
What's this but a change
To the new oblong house?
The round mud hut is no more.²⁷

But modernity in Africa is not only contrasted with tradition; it is also substantially identified with Westernization. That is why the second dialectic between modernity and tradition is so intimately linked with the third dialectic between the indigenous and the foreign. The very situation of those African writers using European languages was a dramatization of the basic tension between what was native and what was alien. Three forces were at work in facilitating this alien penetration of African societies. One was precisely Western-style education, whose pinnacle was universities like Dakar, Ibadan and Makerere. The second medium of penetration was Western Christianity, importing new paradigms of both ethics and explanation. The third medium of penetration was technology, especially those aspects which were of relevance to economic change and material production.

The writers of this period were much more conscious of the implications of Western education and Western Christianity than they seemed to be of the implications of Western technology and science. On the educational front, there was some recognition that these new processes of instruction and socialization created forms of cultural

²⁷ J. Waiguru, in D. Cook, 1965, p. 132; see also I. N. Shariff, 1988.

dependency. New Africans were in the process of being manufactured – somewhat less African than their parents were. Jonathan Kariara writing in English and at a Western-style university institution, wondered if he were being encased in clay, stifled by an alien structure.

I lay the other night and dreamt
That we were all being glazed
With a white clay of foreign education,
And it was stifling, stifling the sleeping blackman
Inside there.

.
Will it be the pearl in the oyster shell,
Or mere rottenness? 28

As for the impact of Christianity, this has also been treated extensively in African literature. The best-known example certainly is Mongo Beti's *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba*. Ngugi's novels are at times obsessed with this clash, a perfectly understandable preoccupation for a writer who is a Kikuyu who grew up in the course of the Mau Mau emergency. The impact of Christianity was at many levels – it affected conceptions of knowledge, methods of rearing children, rituals of initiation and rites of passage, concepts of right and wrong, and paradigms of explaining natural phenomena, as well as the broader interpretation of metaphysical and supernatural concern. Western Christianity was thus a fundamental factor in the broader Westernization of Africa.

Okot p'Bitek drew attention to the tendency among Africans even to recreate their own gods in the image of the Christian God. As Okot p'Bitek put it:

When students of African religions describe African deities as eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, etc., they intimate that African deities have identical attributes with those of the Christian God. In other words, they suggest that Africans hellenized their deities, but before coming into contact with Greek metaphysical thinking. . . . African peoples may describe their deities as 'strong', but not 'omnipotent'; 'wise', not 'omniscient'; 'old', not 'eternal', 'great', not 'omnipresent'. Like Danquah, Mbiti, Idowu, Busia, Abraham, Kenyatta, Senghor and the missionaries, modern Western Christian anthropologists are intellectual smugglers. They are busy introducing Greek metaphysical conceptions into African religious thought. The African deities of the books, clothed with the attributes of the Christian God, are, in the main, creations of the students of the religions. They are all beyond recognition to the ordinary African in the countryside.²⁹

Okot p'Bitek later became Uganda's most eloquent rebel against Western cultural imperialism. His poem, *Song of Lawino*, is one of the strongest statements on cultural authenticity to have emerged out of Africa.

²⁸ J. Kariara, in D. Cook, 1965, p. 100.

²⁹ O. p'Bitek, 1971, pp. 80 and 88.

As for the dialectic between the individual and society, this too was linked to some extent with the impact of Christianity and the Protestant idea of personal accountability before God.

Individualism in Africa was also fostered by the ideas of private property which came with Western capitalism. In *East African Childhood*, Joseph A. Lijembe refers to his discovery of the principle of property after he left home and went to a Western-style school:

At home I had not been given a chance to care for and look after a bit of property that I could really call 'mine'. At school I found I possessed a set of articles, which, for a period, were mine. I had to begin afresh learning how to respect not only my things, but those that belonged to my class-mates and the school as a whole . . . 30

The third major promoter of individualism was the new liberal ethos which came with Western political ideologies. The special premium which liberalism gave to individualism helped to transform the political horizons of African writers, as well as other African intellectuals. As Jonathan Kariara said of one of his short-story characters: 'He had inherited two things from the white man, a new religion and the desire to decide for himself'.³¹

In politics, Western liberalism helped to inspire demands for 'one man, one vote' and liberal forms of self-determination. In literature, individualism produced the new writers. After all, traditional oral literature was in some sense a literature without authors, a collective and cumulative heritage without individual attribution. But the new novels and poems, the new plays and short stories were works by specific artists, bearing their names or their pen-names. The very birth of written literature in European languages constituted an important departure from the collective traditions of an orally transmitted heritage. With the new trend came personalized copyright, royalties for individual authors and rules against plagiarism.

In addition, some of the art-forms which the writers were exploring themselves required a capacity on the part of the writer to create believable individual characters. As we indicated earlier, the short story in Africa has its antecedents in folk tales; modern verse can be a continuation of ancestral poetry, but the novel as normally understood is clearly a foreign art-form now being developed for African purposes. And the history of the novel is intimately connected with the rise of individualism in the West. Molly Mazrui, in her Makerere thesis on the individual and society in some African fiction, takes us back to that first English novel, *Robinson Crusoe*. She then quotes a critic who said of that book: '. . . the terms of the problem of the novel and of modern thought alike were established when the old order of moral and social relationships was shipwrecked, with Robinson Crusoe, by the rising tide of individualism'.³²

³⁰ J. A. Lijembe, 1967, pp. 25–6.

³¹ J. Kariara, in D. Cook, 1965, p. 95.

³² I. Watt, 1969, p. 96.

Molly Mazrui related this observation to African societies, and argued that those societies had to some extent been shipwrecked by colonialism. Individualism in many areas of life was rapidly becoming a new order.

Many African novelists, including Achebe and Ngugi, have explored what caused the shipwreck and tried to understand whether it was avoidable or not. They have shown us the anguish and conflict both for the individual and for his community as fluidity of values and rapidly changing standards have become the order of the day. . . . There are many reasons why this growth of individualism in Africa may be lamented, but among its more positive aspects must be counted the birth of the African novel.³³

The fifth dialectic affecting African writers concerned the dilemma between capitalism and socialism. The initial African enthusiasm for at least socialist rhetoric was connected with the degree to which capitalism had been an ally of imperialism. Since socialism was opposed to capitalism, and African nationalism was opposed to imperialism, nationalistic ideas in Africa found a comradeship-in-arms with socialistic ideas from elsewhere.

Opposition to exploitation, whether it was by domestic capitalists or external imperialists, was just beginning to inspire African intellectuals on the eve of independence. Its major expression came a little later with the likes of Ousmane Sembene, Ayikwei Armah, Chinua Achebe or Wole Soyinka and first of all Franz Fanon.

In 1988 – a mere two years after Laureate Wole Soyinka’s achievement -the Nobel Prize for Literature was once again in Africa. This time the recipient of the prize was Nagib Mahfuz, Egypt’s greatest contemporary novelist, deeply concerned about exploitation. In the Dickensian tradition, much of Mahfuz’s early and middle work focused on the life of the urban poor. Mahfuz demonstrated a remarkable sensitivity to the nuances and colour of life in the urban slums – especially in his most famous work, *The Valley of al-Midakk*.

The impact of the Western world on North Africa is widely discussed in the literature of the Maghreb. Arabic and the French language compete as media of literary expression in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. A number of literary reviews have helped promote new radical talent. In Tunisia the journal *Al-Fikr* (‘Thought’) played a particularly historic literary role, sometimes politicized. North Africa is also leading the way in the literature of women’s liberation.

‘Westernization’ as a theme in the modern Egyptian novel has included Tawfik al-Hakim’s *The Bird from the East* and the novella by Yakyā Hakki, *The Lamp of Umm Hashim*. A profound cultural ambivalence is at the core.

Ideological ambivalence has also been recurrent when writers have confronted exploitation. In North Africa the tension has sometimes been between Islam and secular radicalism. All over the continent the principle of social equality has often mesmerized novelists, poets and playwrights.

³³ M. Mazrui, 1972, p. 407.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, for one, later evolved into a neo-Marxist, combining more fully his rebellion against imperialism with a disgust for domestic African capitalists. But that itself was a transition from the preoccupation of colonized Africans before independence in their quest for indigenous authenticity to a new dedication concerned with social transformation and the pursuit of greater equity.

Deeply related to this transition from colonial obsessions to independent commitments is the sixth dialectic we mentioned – the dialectic between the attractions of rapid economic development as against the disciplines of self-reliance and even self-denial. This dialectic as a literary concern was most elaborately explored in Tanzania, especially in the later period of the Arusha Declaration and the pursuit of *ujamaa*. Significantly, much of the literary debate and discussion concerning self-reliance in Tanzania is to be found more in Kiswahili literature than in English writings. Poetry in Tanzania in this period is partly a transition from the disciplined rhyme of Shaaban Robert to the experimentalist blank verse of Euphrase Kezilahabi.

Cultural self-reliance is itself caught up in the very vigour of Kiswahili literature in Tanzania. To use a language more widely understood in society was itself a tribute to *ujamaa* and the ideal of real authenticity.

The new political literature on dependency in Africa certainly belongs to this general school of emphasis, and has affinities with the literature of *dependencia* of Latin America. The thrust of the discussion is that Africa may have attained some level of political independence, but the struggle for economic autonomy and cultural authenticity has only just begun. The economies of Africa are still penetrated by foreign capital, and members of the new black bourgeoisie are mainly allies of external foreign interests. The cultural penetration includes the prevalence of a consumer culture, the persistence of a colonial educational structure, the infiltration of African societies by alien information media and electronic services, and the survival of language policies which serve the interests of the élite and ruling classes and are inadequately sensitive to the needs of the masses. The continuing domination of élite culture in Africa by foreign languages becomes symptomatic of this deep-seated cultural dependency.

Female literary rebels against neo-colonialism have included Molara Ogundipe-Leslie of Nigeria, Abena Busia of Ghana, and Christine Obbo of Uganda. One of the ironies of their predicament is that these particular women are among the most Westernized of their generation.

Political writers in Anglophone Africa who are concerned with economic dependency include Adebayo Adedeji of Nigeria, Isa Shivji of Tanzania, Dan Nabudere of Uganda and Atieno-Odhiambo of Kenya. Political writers concerned with cultural dependence include Chinweizu of Nigeria, the late Okot p'Bitek of Uganda, Ali A. Mazrui of Kenya and Julius K. Nyerere of Tanzania. Much of the writing in this area is either academic or polemical: only a little has so far taken the form of poetry or fiction. But the basic dilemma between dependent development on one side and self-reliant stagnation on the other is in any case the latest incarnation of such older dilemmas as the one between tradition and modernity, and between the indigenous and the foreign. What the writers of

the earlier decades of this century grappled with in terms of the tensions of modernization and freedom are now being explored in terms of the tensions of development and dependency.

But finally we have the most fundamental dialectic of them all – the dialectic between African distinctiveness and the idea of universalism, between the uniqueness of the African person and the Catholicism of humanity. Our writers in the days before independence did indeed often use the language of humanity, but more often to demand rights for Africans.

Chinua Achebe has referred to 'the black writer's burden'. Achebe points out that in colonial Africa it was the African writer's job to attack colonial injustice. In independent Africa, according to Achebe, the writer must still accept the duty to challenge injustice wherever he sees it, even if it is injustice committed by Africans against Africans:

. . . we must never agree to bargain away the right to be treated like full members of the human family. We must seek the freedom to express thought and feeling, even against ourselves, without the anxiety that what we might say might be taken as evidence against our race.³⁴

In a way, political independence has been a contributory factor towards expanding the moral horizons of African intellectuals generally. To experience tyranny by Africans against Africans after experiencing the domination of Africans by white people is to learn about the universalism of rights and duties, and sin and redemption. The radicalization of writers like Kofi Awonoor and Lewis Nkosi has been part of this adventure into new categorical imperatives. Some writers have gone beyond demanding rights for Africans, or for black people – they have transcended even pan-Africanism as a specialized solidarity, and have instead sought to identify with the oppressed generally. Writers have indeed gone political – just as politicians had once gone literary. Journalists of this universalist persuasion include Muhammad Sid-Ahmed of *Al-Ahram* in Cairo.

³⁴ C. Achebe, 1966, pp. 138–9.

This seventh theme of conflict, between the parochial and the universal, between Africanity and humanity, is perhaps the most central issue of authenticity. The tension between the past and the present, tradition and modernity, are ultimately agonies of epochs across time. The tensions between the indigenous and the foreign are concerned with a dialectic across space. The confrontation between socialism and capitalism is a confrontation across values. The dilemma between rapid development and stagnant self-reliance is also about values, but taking the form of priorities in policy. But in the final analysis, it is the dialectic between the individual and society, on one side, and between society and universalism on the other, that lies at the heart of art itself. How the human person relates to the immediate social group and how that social group relates to humanity itself together constitute the ultimate universe of aesthetic exploration. Senghor has called it 'the Civilization of the Universal'.

The African writers we have examined in this essay are decidedly part of that exploration. Caught up in the agonies of multiple estrangement – political, educational, linguistic, aesthetic and technical – the African writers are engaged in setting the pace in the struggle to recover their memory, in the quest for ultimate renewal.

On literature and war

Although African literature after independence has paid considerable attention to the military, it has paid relatively little attention to war itself. And in discussing soldiers, African writers have been more preoccupied with military villains than with military heroes. An adversarial relationship has developed between writers and soldiers, except for liberation fighters in Northern and in Southern Africa. A whole generation of Algerian writers was inspired by armed struggle. And yet even liberation poets like Dennis Brutus of South Africa are ambivalent about 'boots, bayonets and knuckles'.

Two questions arise. Why is there so little written literature of military heroism in postcolonial Africa? Why is there so much literature about military villainy?

The dearth of a written literature of heroism is not due to a dearth of heroes. Many brave men and women have died for their respective causes in African wars since independence. But the nature of those wars has tended to make praise-songs of heroes politically sensitive. After all, apart from Egypt, most wars experienced by independent African countries have been *civil wars*, often secessionist.

Chinua Achebe – who became Biafra's ambassador-at-large while the civil war lasted – has written things about the conflict. But his status in post-war Nigeria has inevitably discouraged too obvious a glorification of Biafra and its heroes. The Federal side would not want to reactivate old wounds among the Igbo (Ibo) either.

The Ugandan military prophetess of the late 1980s, Alice Lakwena, was an Acholi equivalent of Joan of Arc. But praise-songs in her honour were unlikely since Yoweri Museveni's government regarded her as a 'tribal rebel'.

Another reason for the absence of military heroism in African literature may simply be that there has been a low level of combat involvement by the élite in many of Africa's wars since independence. Poets and writers are more likely to be inspired by the sacrifices of fellow intellectuals than by the death of unknown peasants. The death of Christopher Okigbo in the Nigerian civil war inspired a greater literary response than the death of half a million anonymous young Igbo. Ali Mazrui wrote his only novel, *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo*, in response to that death of a fellow intellectual.

In Nigeria itself, so few Igbo élite or Federal intellectuals were aroused enough to bear arms on behalf of either Biafra or Federal Nigeria. Intellectuals took sides in the war, and sometimes assumed non-combat roles in support of their side. But few intellectuals joined their respective armies or volunteered to go to the front line. In the words of John De St. Jorre in his impressive book, *The Nigerian Civil War*:

. . . the proportion of actual casualties among the élite, compared with the masses is minute and must constitute something of a record in the history of warfare. With a few courageous exceptions, the Nigerian and Biafran intellectuals, unlike their counterparts, say, in the First World War or Spanish civil war, did not believe in picking up a rifle to defend the cause. The Nigerian war produced its 'Wilfred Owen' (the Biafran poet, Christopher Okigbo, who died in action in Nsukka early in the fighting), but we have yet to see the Nigerian or Biafran equivalent of a Robert Graves, a George Orwell, or a Norman Mailer emerge.³⁵

The shortage of African heroic military literature may also be due to the fact that a war against a foreign power is the most likely conflict to generate the type of patriotic fervour which celebrates heroes. Yet Africa – especially south of the Sahara – has been short of foreign military adversaries since independence.

The October war of 1973 between Egypt and Israel was regarded as heroic by Egyptians and generated poetry and songs in Egypt. Morocco's war to retain Western Sahara has also been widely seen at home as patriotic – and has similarly inspired song and poetry. The Western Sahara (recognized by the Organization of African Unity as the Sahrāwi Arab Democratic Republic) has in turn generated heroic literature of its own about its own conflict with Morocco, while the wars in the Horn of Africa also gave birth to anguished poetry.

For Chad, Libya was a hostile foreign power. Chad's struggle against Libyan hegemony helped to nourish oral poetry and heroic songs. In 1987, Chad struck into the Libyan heartland for the first time: Libyan patriotism was wounded in a new way. It was only a matter of time before Libyan counter-moves in defence of *al-watān* (ancestral land) would provoke its own pool of heroic literature.

What had already inspired such songs and poetry was the American bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi in April 1986. The heroism of 'David versus Goliath' had been re-enacted on Arab soil.

South of the Sahara, the image of the warrior is used more widely in indigenous languages – but often as a metaphor for non-military forms of combat. Tanzania's Swahili poet, Kezilahabi, proclaims 'Had I been a warrior I would have bathed in blood and water' (*Kichwa na Mwili*, 1974). But it is metaphorical.

If there is such a shortage of literal African military heroes in literature, why is there a greater abundance of African military villains? Why has there developed an adversarial relationship between African writers and African soldiers? A major reason is that since independence, soldiers have been more inclined to be involved in politics than in war. And yet soldiers and writers have conflicting visions of the political process. Perhaps the adversarial relationship has been between writers and *rulers* – be those rulers military or civilian.

³⁵ J. De St. Jorre, 1972, pp. 374–5.

Muhammad Haykal, former editor of *Al-Ahram* in Egypt, is one political writer who rose to great influence under al-Nasser – only to end up behind bars under Anwar under Anwar al-Sadat. Yet Haykal's impact on Arab journalism has remained immense. Wole Soyinka's angriest and perhaps most irrational book is *The Man Died*. It is a strong indictment not only of tyranny but also of the military, *per se*. It is a statement of the torment of detention to which Soyinka was subjected by General Gowon's regime. Soyinka's contempt for the soldiers is palpable in the book. On the other hand, Keya's Nagugi wa Thiorig'o was imprisoned by a *civilian* regime. His own post-detention statement was almost as angry as Soyinka's.

Somalia's leading novelist, Nuruddin Farah, has written a trilogy of novels against military tyranny in his home country. Although coming from a family of poets in the Somali language, Farah abandoned his mother-tongue as a medium for his literary work. The reasons he has given are the constraints of repression in Somalia. If he wrote in the Somali language he would not be read at all. Under Siad Barre, Farah's books were banned in the main market of the language – Somalia itself.

In his plays, Farah has also often returned to the theme of tyranny. *Yusuf and His Brothers* is indeed a story of heroism – pitched against the callous obscenities of repression. The play has been successfully staged in Nigeria.

On balance, it continues to be one of the anomalies of post-colonial literature that war has not been an inspiration for 'powerful poetic emotions, recollected in tranquillity'. It is also a post-colonial anomaly that African soldiers are more recognized in the literature as villains than as heroes. This includes Chinua Achebe's 1987 novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, his first since the Nigerian civil war. Soldiers in their post-colonial roles have aroused among writers more hostility than hero-worship – for better or for worse.

Conclusion: literature and the triple heritage

Like other branches of culture, African literature has been subject to the wider influences of Africa's triple heritage. The heritage consists of the three legacies of indigenous values, Islamic influences and the impact of Western culture. The different branches of literature have responded differently to the three legacies.

While African fiction has been greatly enriched by contact with the West, indigenous African poetry in inland West Africa and along the shores of the Indian Ocean has been more enriched by contact with Islam. Even in the religiously controversial area of song, the Zanzibari woman singer, Siti bint Saad, was a fusion of Islam and Africanity.

The Somali have developed, as we indicated earlier, an exceptional culture of oral and even instant poetry. Their greatest modern national hero – Sayed Muhammad Abdallāh Hassan – was (in British terms) a fusion of William Shakespeare and Winston Churchill. The exceptionally *sane* Mullah was both saviour of the nation and hero of the language. Of course the Sayed lived prior to the period of this volume, but his influence on contemporary Somali poetry is still so great that the Sayed has to be regarded as one of the persistent forces of modern Somali literature at least to the end of the twentieth century.

In Tanzania, many of the writers are not Muslims. And yet the Swahili poetic traditions within which they have operated have been partly a product of contact between Islam and African culture. Much of the imagery is rooted in words of Arabic derivation. Quite often there is one Bantu word and an Arabic synonym, a bonus for the Swahili poet. Two words for a concept, one Bantu, the other borrowed from Arabic:

Mapenzi and *mahaba* (love);
pwaa and *bahari* (the sea);
nchi and *ardhi* (the land);
mnyama and *hayawani*(animal);
Mtu and *Binaadamu* (human being);
Ngoja and *Subiri* (wait).

And when the poet is stuck for a new concept, the two traditional sources have been the Bantu and Islamic legacies.

Nor is the outlet for poetry limited to literary magazines and scholarly journals. Tanzanian newspapers have space not only for 'Letters to the Editor' but also for 'Poems to the Editor'. Readers send to the editor poems and verses on subjects which range from traditional medicine to a new piece of legislation, from matrimonial problems to the rate of inflation. It is again worth nothing that the debating poets of Tanzania have included highly eloquent women.

In such a literary national atmosphere it was not surprising that the head of state should try his hand at completing the triple heritage by translating Shakespeare into Kiswahili. The translations themselves generated a debate in Tanzania of a purely literary kind. Was blank verse admissible in Swahili poetry? Shakespeare had indeed written the plays in blank verse. That was perfectly compatible with the rules of poetic composition and the use of meters in the English language. Julius Nyerere had translated Shakespeare's plays also into blank verse. What was admissible in the English language was surely not necessarily admissible in Kiswahili. The debate shifted in Tanzania from the issue of translating foreign plays to the more basic indigenous issue of the nature of Swahili poetry itself.

On the issue of African languages and literature Islam has played a more paradoxical role. On the one hand, Islam appears to be linguistically intolerant. Formal prayer has to be in the Arabic language. The *Muezzin* calls believers to prayer in Arabic. The Kur'ān in its sacred role has to be read in Arabic.

At first sight this appears to be linguistically less tolerant than Christian behaviour. Even Catholicism has scaled down the role of Latin in worship and ritual. On the other hand, Jesus spoke Aramaic. The Bible (a work of immense influence in African literature) is a book in translation anyhow – so why not one more additional translation into an African language this time? If the Bible is already in English, why not also in Lunyoro-Lutoro? It has already been translated into over 100 African languages.

It is as if the Christian God was a god in exile. Christianity is a religion which failed at home and triumphed abroad. Its centre was not among the Jews and other Semites but among Caucasians – not in the Middle East but in the West. It was therefore easy to accept the word of God in translation.

But Islam triumphed among those to whom it was first revealed – and in the language in which it was revealed, Arabic. To insist on, *Arabic* as the language of worship is to insist on authenticity. It is also to insist on the original poetry of the Kur'ān. Hausa poetry has felt that Kur'ānic impact.

But has the insistence on Arabic for formal worship helped or hindered both African languages in contact with Islam, and African poetry in contact with Islam?

In Muslim Africa south of the Sahara before European colonialism, Arabic was not the official language of the state but was the official language of the 'Church', or the Mosque.

On the whole, the effect was to enrich languages like Kiswahili. Other languages influenced by Arabic include Wolof, Somali, Tigrinya and Tigre.

What about African poetry and its response to Africa's triple heritage? How has African literature been affected by the imported legacies of the West and Islam? There has been a school of thought in the West which has denied Africans a capacity for art at all. Let us look at this challenge more closely.

Thomas Jefferson of America went to the extent of denying blacks a capacity for art or poetry. In Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Paris, 1784) there occurs the following astonishing observation:

. . . never yet could I find that a black man had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never saw even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture. In music they are more generally gifted than the whites with accurate ears for tune and time, and they have been found capable of imagining a small catch. Whether they will be equal to the composition of a more extensive run of melody, or of complicated harmony, is yet to be proved.

Jefferson then goes on to make an interesting statement. Pain is often a mother of poetry – anguish a stimulant to the muse. In Jefferson's words:

Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrus of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion, indeed, has produced a Phyllis Wheatley; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism.

While Hegel and Hugh Trevor-Roper denied Africans a capacity for history, Thomas Jefferson had earlier denied Africans a capacity for art. Yet both forms of prejudice have been contradicted many times by the relentless march of historical and social research.

As for Thomas Jefferson's belief that blacks were a people without poetry, black Ethiopians were *writing* poetry before Jefferson's ancestors in the British Isles were taught the Latin alphabet by the Romans. And so entrenched is the poetic tradition among the Kiswahili-speaking peoples of East Africa today that the newspapers receive not only 'Letters to the Editor' but also 'Poems to the Editor' almost every day, as we indicated.

The most powerful genre of literature in Africa continues to be poetry – both oral and written, in both indigenous and foreign languages. Some of the poetry is a celebration of uniqueness; some is a cry of anguish. Considering his tragic fate as a casualty of the Nigerian civil war, few lines in African literature are as poignant and *prophetic* as the following ones by Christopher Okigbo:

When you have finished
And done up my stitches
Wake me near the altar –
And this poem will be finished.

Léopold Senghor fuses Africanity with femininity. If Eve was the mother of the human species, and Africa was the mother of Eve, where does Africa end and womanhood begin? Senghor answers thus:

Naked woman, black woman,
Clad in your colour that is life,
In your form that is beauty!
I have grown up in your shade,
the sweetness of your hands bound my eyes.
And now in the heart of summer and noon,
I discover you, promised earth,
from the tower of your sun-scorched neck
And your beauty smites me to the full
of my heart like the flash of an eagle.
Naked woman, dark woman . . .

But there is more than sadness and joy in African literature – more than tragedy and comedy. To paraphrase and supplement a Sierra Leonean poet-diplomat, Davidson Abioseh Nicol:

‘You are not a country, Africa
You are a concept . . .’
You are not a concept, Africa,
You are a glimpse of the infinite.